

Story 1: Edo Child Rearing Experience

Chapter 1

Rihan laughed loudly. When the youkai who were present saw this, they couldn't help but smile in response. Seeing a giggling baby is like having warm water flow through you. This is the same for both humans and youkai. Even though they always speak of doing bad things, and are always threatening others fiercely, and boasting about the youkai code, in front of a laughing little Rihan, they will always smile such that their eyes become a line.

This is the Nura Gumi's mansion in Edo. The room with its opened paper doors faces the outer corridor. The warm afternoon sun shone into the room.

Youhime was carrying Rihan in her arms, her husband Nurarihyon sitting cross-legged next to her. Nurarihyon, who was watching little Rihan, had a very warm expression on his face, showing the amount of love and how much he treasured the little life.

"Rihan-sama is really too cute, it's almost a crime."

Karasu Tengu, who was flying at a low altitude, said so as he held a toy in front of Rihan, playing with him. This toy is made from Karasu Tengu's feathers. A few feathers were stuck on the end of a bamboo stick, like a feather duster. Karasu Tengu was moving it around, making it dance in front of Rihan, which made him very happy. After placing it into Rihan's little hands, Rihan also started to play with it, shaking it around.

"His features are cute, and his actions are cute. You won't get tired of staring at him all day."

Karasu Tengu praised greatly.

"Of course."

The Supreme Commander replied with a laugh.

"I'm so handsome and capable, Youhime is captivatingly beautiful, a child born from these two people will definitely be cute."

"Ayakashi-sama..."

Youhime hit her husband's knee while blushing. This married couple, one would always exaggerate his words without holding back, while the other would always blush madly. Seeing the interaction between the two of them, the youkai couldn't help but burst into laughter. With such joyous sounds being produced so suddenly, Rihan felt very puzzled, and his eyes were wide open. And so passed such blissful times.

In Kyoto, Nurarihyon fell in love with Youhime at first sight, and Youhime followed him to Edo afterwards. Under Karasu Tengu's management, the two of them held their marriage at the mansion. About three months later, Youhime discovered she was pregnant. Even though she felt rather uneasy about her first pregnancy, thanks to Karasu Tengu's care and the help from the other members, Youhime delivered her first child safely.

The boy who was born was named Rihan, and half a year has passed since then.

It could be because she was not used to Edo's environment and that it was her first delivery, but not long after she gave birth to Rihan, she came down with a flu and had to stay in bed for some time. However, the illness was not serious and after she recovered, both mother and son had been healthy ever since. Rihan is also growing steadily every day.

"Oh, yeah. Rihan was *able to crawl* yesterday."

The Supreme Commander, who just recalled that fact, said so with a huge smile on his face. The youkai started to get excited, creating an uproar.

“Young Master can crawl now!”

“He can crawl at six months of age?”

“Such an early developer!”

“I want to see! I want to see!” Natto Kazo jumped up and down excitedly, expressing his wish to see the baby crawl. Therefore the Supreme Commander said “Rihan”, took the baby from Youhime, and put him on his knee.

“Rihan, do you still remember what you did yesterday, hmm?”

The Supreme Commander said as he placed Rihan on the tatami to allow him to crawl on the floor. But Rihan did not seem to know what to do, and he only turned left and right to observe his surroundings.

“What’s wrong Rihan? Just do it like yesterday, come on.”

Seeing the Supreme Commander pat Rihan’s bottom twice, Youhime couldn’t hold it in anymore and spoke...

“Ayakashi-sama... please don’t force the child, okay?”

“Oh, sorry.”

The Supreme Commander scratched his head. Even though this husband loved his child very much, but his actions were still rough. It has only been half a year since the child was born, Youhime did not know how many more worrying situations could occur in the future.

“But, it’s really strange, he really did start crawling yesterday.”

The Supreme Commander did not seem to have given up, and tried to analyse the reasons, his head tilted to the side.

“Then, let’s try this.”

After saying that, Karasu Tengu took the feather toy and placed it quite some distance away from Rihan, and it was very effective. Rihan’s eyes lit up when he saw the toy, and started to crawl in the direction of the toy. With his stomach sliding along the tatami, and using his hands to push himself forward, the scene was really cute.

Sometime later, Rihan finally grabbed the feather toy. The room was immediately filled with cheers.

“Wah! That was great!”

“Rihan-sama is amazing!”

“Seeing this, he could even start walking tomorrow!”

The joke said by an unknown person caused the room to burst into laughter once more. Suddenly, a woman’s voice could be heard from the corridor outside,

“All of you have so much free time. What’s so fun about being with that brat, aren’t you sick of it already?”

The one who spoke is the Yuki-onna, Setsura. She was lying on her side along the outer corridor, reading through an Edo art book, and did not seem to want to participate in what everyone else was doing.

“Setsura, it’s you. Come over and play with Rihan too.”

The Supreme Commander said to her, but----

“No thanks. I’m afraid I’ll turn him into an ice cube by accident. Also, don’t address me by name.”

The Supreme Commander was hit with a bucket of cold water. Actually, it wasn’t the first time Setsura had spoken in such a manner, and Youhime was used to hearing it a long time ago such that she could smile in response to it. In addition, even though Setsura had said that, she would secretly play with Rihan when nobody else was around. Like yesterday, when Rihan was crawling along the corridor, Setsura used her snow and ice to create little spheres which looked like glass balls to place in front of him as toys. Before Rihan was born, Setsura would often chat with Youhime. The term Tsundere would probably describe people like her. Youhime had to rely on Setsura’s company many times in order to go through her uneasy pregnancy.

Talking about Tsunderes, one of the subordinates of the Nura Gumi, Hitotsume, was very similar to Setsura.

--Sigh, in order to take care of the brat, we’re totally short on people such that even someone of my position needs to go and handle the situation personally. And with a brat around, I won’t be able to smoke, that’s so troublesome.

Hitotsume said so loudly, intending for others to hear as he put on his straw sandals. But when he returned after completing his task, he would have a present for Rihan with him.

Every youkai in the Nura Gumi had a different way of expressing it, but all of them have a kind heart.

“Come come come, now it’s my turn...”

The one who went on his knees and crawled towards Rihan was the subordinate wearing a mask, Hihi. First shouting “I’m not here”, then taking off the mask and shouting “I’m here”, the “Peek-a-boo” game was Hihi’s way to playing with children. However, as Hihi would always allow Rihan lean against his lap while playing the game, he would be facing downwards the whole time, so no one knew what Hihi’s expression was.

“Hihi-sama’s ‘Peek-a-boo’ game is reserved only for Rihan-sama.”

Natto Kozo whispered as he stood at the side. Hihi started to entertain Rihan like usual.

“I’m not here... I’m not here... I’m here!”

Rihan laughed happily. This act worked all the time.

“Oh, Gyuuki.”

Hearing their Supreme Commander’s voice, the group of youkai looked towards the outer corridor.

The subordinate Gyuuki was standing there. There were more subordinates here today, because there will be General Meeting later. The Nura Gumi had decided that there will be a meeting every month, so all the subordinates will gather at the Main House during that time.

After bowing to Youhime, Gyuuki turned to the Supreme Commander.

“Greetings, Supreme Commander, I just arrived in Edo. How is Rihan-sama?”

(T/N: Gyuuki is saying this in a humble manner. A more literal translation from Chinese is more like “This subordinate just arrived in Edo.”)

“Yeah, thanks to you, he is doing very well. Gyuuki, come and hold him for a while.”

“That’s... not necessary.”

Gyuuki shook his head, but the Supreme Commander stood up.

“Okay, just hold him a bit. Let Rihan taste the fresh air that you brought down from Mount Nejireme.”

After saying that, the Supreme Commander took Rihan from Hihi and put him in Gyuuki's arms. It seems like Gyuuki had never held Rihan before. And so, the large male who is taller than six feet (more than 180cm) started to make panicked noises while holding a little infant. His cautious and fearful appearance was really funny, such that even Youhime couldn't help but laugh a little.

Rihan, who was in Gyuuki's arms, did not cry at all. He just stared at Gyuuki's face. Gyuuki also stared at Rihan.

Gyuuki simply stood there without saying anything. After a short while—

"Hey, say something!"

The Supreme Commander seemed to have lost his patience, and said this impatiently.

"You can stick your tongue out and everything, say something to him!"

Even with such words, Gyuuki is a warrior. Entertaining children was not his forte, his sharp eyebrows and stare meant that he could not change his expression at will.

Even though it was difficult for him, but Gyuuki felt that keeping silent was no good as well, so he fixed his gaze on Rihan and opened his mouth,

"...Rihan, you have to grow up safely, and become a honourable second generation leader (T/N: Or Nidaime), and help your parents, okay?"

"Hey! That's too serious!"

The Supreme Commander said with a strained smile. Rihan also made a 'Da' sound, like he agreed with what his father was saying. Youhime couldn't help but laugh seeing that scene.

Chapter 2

On this day, after the conclusion of the General Meeting, the Nura Gumi held a banquet.

Rihan was also constantly entertained by the youkai during the banquet. This is a youkai residence and experts in scaring and entertaining others will naturally be present. A Tsukumogami which had the ability to transform kept changing its form in front of Rihan, making him wave his arms continuously in excitement.

The banquet today was very lively as usual, and carried on till late at night. Even though Youhime left the banquet early since Rihan had fallen asleep, she still went to bed a lot later than usual.

The next day, three groups of guests came to the mansion. One group came in the morning, and during the afternoon till evening, two groups came to visit. The guests in the morning were members who were related by blood, and the other two groups came from territories far away, visiting for the first time. Their purpose was to offer their congratulations with regards to Rihan's birth.

Rihan was born half a year ago, but guests still came occasionally with gifts to congratulate them. To be more accurate, the number of visitors had increased the past two months. They probably knew that the period after the arrival of the baby would be very hectic, so they waited till the baby was a little older and stable before started to visit. Most of the groups who live near Edo have already gave their greetings, but the region of Kanto is huge, and there are a large number of youkai, and in order for all the youkai to drop by, it would take a long time.

In addition, there are some guests who they have never interacted with before, they are the youkai from outside of the Kanto region. The reason for this has something to do with Nura Gumi winning the Kyoto – Osaka battle and becoming the Lord of Pandemonium. Even though they did not know about the Nura Gumi before, the situation has changed. Taking into account the possibility of receiving benefits in the future, going to send their greetings will only

be advantageous --- with this train of thought, there will naturally be many guests who will visit from faraway lands. With regards to this, Rihan's birth is the best excuse to do so.

When guests arrive, Youhime will stand by her husband's side, carrying Rihan. If the guests came in the evening, arranging a banquet to show their hospitality was also a common occurrence. When that happened, Youhime will also attend the banquet, although she would leave halfway.

With Rihan's birth, the mansion became a place for the guests to visit and stay.

Today, the third group of guests who came in the evening also accepted their hospitality and stayed for dinner. The guests had left rather early, conscious of the time, but Youhime still felt very tired.

After giving Rihan to Nurarihyon, who had actually taken his bath, Youhime walked towards the bathhouse.

After washing herself, Youhime gave a long sigh as she soaked inside the tub. Her tense shoulders started to relax. Looking up at the steamy ceiling, she couldn't help but sigh again.

--Being troubled by this sort of issues, am I being too luxurious...?

Youhime thought to herself.

The question which plagued her lately started to surface in her mind.

It has something to do with Rihan. The way they are raising him now, is it appropriate? Lately, Youhime had been thinking about this.

The comforting thing is that Rihan is very healthy. There was a clan of doctors affiliated with the Nura Gumi, and they were also the personal doctors of the Main House. Besides that, the regular checkups have declared that Rihan's body was fine, and it was guaranteed that there was nothing wrong with his health.

But right now, Youhime is worried about Rihan's heart, meaning his mental and emotional state. Since this is her first child, Youhime did not know much about other things. However, she always had the thought that besides growing up healthily, mental development is also important.

With regards to Rihan, Youhime hopes that he will possess a rich soul.

To do that, Rihan would have to interact with many types of people and scenery. That was the issue that Youhime kept thinking about.

Thinking about this, Youhime felt that the scenarios which Rihan interacted with had no variations, and it had been especially serious these two months. To be more specific, he was being exposed to youkai filled environments too often.

Being surrounded by youkai, even the guests were youkai.

Saying that even though she was living in a youkai mansion, Youhime felt that it was a funny thing. However, Youhime still hoped that she would be able to spend more time in the streets to allow Rihan to interact with normal people and scenery.

Her husband Nurarihyon is a capable and gentle Supreme Commander of Youkai. Youhime was not dissatisfied with that at all. She loves him from the bottom of her heart, and has a lot of respect for him. The youkai in the mansion are friendly. All the youkai treated Rihan like a treasure and pamper him a lot.

The reason why she thought she was being too luxurious was because of this.

Inside a home filled with laughter, with friendly youkai who are willing to protect her, she still desired the air of the human world.

Youhime felt that this issue could not be brought up to her husband easily, so she suppressed it inside her heart. Even though it had not reached a stage where she was unhappy every day, but the frequency which she ended up brooding had increased.

Youhime half submerged her face in the bathwater, gazing at the ripples spreading on its surface. Just then—

“Youhime-san.”

A voice could be heard from the other side of the door. It was a girl’s voice.

“This is Kokehime. Can I take a bath with you?”

Youhime agreed. After Kokehime undressed herself, she walked into the bathroom.

The petite girl who walked in was the other human who lived in this youkai mansion. Like Youhime, she had been kidnapped by Hagoromo Gitsune in Kyoto, and had regained her freedom with the help of Nura Gumi. She had arrived in Edo following Youhime after her proposal. Turning her tears into pearls is her special ability. For unknown reasons, she is especially close to the subordinate Hitotsume.

“Are you troubled by something?”

Kokehime asked as she entered the tub, her tone innocent. Youhime gave a smile.

“Troubled? Why did you think that?”

“I heard sighing sounds from outside the door.”

Perhaps I did it subconsciously? But Youhime could not voice her worries about Rihan, and she only shook her head lightly.

“Thank you, Kokehime, but I’m fine. It’s probably because it has been tiring lately.”

“That’s right, there were a lot of guests recently, and Youhime-san still has to take care of Rihan-sama at the same time. Youhime-san is always working hard, it worries me.”

After saying “Thank you” once again, Youhime patted Kokehime.

“How about you? Are you used to Edo? If you’re unhappy with something, you have to tell someone.”

“I’m doing fine. The streets of Edo are wide, and possess many sights that cannot be seen in Edo. And Hitotsume-sama treats me very well...”

When she said this, Kokehime lowered her head, feeling shy. Her cute appearance caused Youhime to laugh.

The both of them talked about various things for a while, a warm atmosphere in the air. Things like gossip about the youkai in the mansion and the clothes which Kokehime bought recently...and so on.

Just as Kokehime mentioned a store which she discovered that sold exquisite hair accessories, Youhime suddenly felt this strong desire to take a stroll along the streets of Edo. How I would love to leisurely take a walk together with Rihan.

Having to deal with the guests who are affiliated with the Nura Gumi every day, days of being unable to relax. Just being able to relax and enrich Rihan’s soul, being able to stroll along the streets of Edo was a very attractive idea.

“That’s right, does Youhime-san wish to go out with me to buy things tomorrow?”

Having been asked so suddenly, Youhime did not know how to respond. Was her desire to go out seen through?

“To...tomorrow?”

“That’s right. Bring Rihan-sama too. Going out for a walk will be a good change of pace.”

The tone of Kokehime’s voice did not seem to be hiding any ulterior motives. It was just a simple invitation.

When she returned from the bathhouse to the bedroom, Rihan was already breathing soundly, showing that he was asleep. The Supreme Commander had also fallen asleep beside him. Falling asleep right after coaxing the child to sleep was a common occurrence.

Telling him about going out with Kokehime can wait till next morning.

Youhime gazed at the two sleeping figures and thought to herself.

--This looks like a big child and a little child sleeping together.

Youhime thought, smiling to herself in response.

Even though her feelings were chaotic right now, but her happiness stems from the husband and child in front of her. This feeling will never waver.

Watching the both of them, Youhime couldn’t hold back a small yawn.

Chapter 3

The next morning, after Youhime had eaten her breakfast, she sought permission from the Supreme Commander.

“I would like to take Rihan for a walk in town with Kokehime...”

“Oh, sure. Be careful.”

The Supreme Commander easily approved of Youhime’s request.

After wearing an outdoors outerwear, Youhime took Rihan and went out with Kokehime. The skies were clear that day. The sun wasn’t glaring at all, a comfortable weather. In addition to the rare trip outdoors, it made Youhime very happy.

After crossing a bridge, the flow of people started to increase.

After browsing through Kokehime’s favourite gofuku shops, they also went to the hair accessory shop mentioned the night before. The owner of the shop was very welcoming, and smiled at Rihan, seeming to like children.

(T/N: Gofuku are high grade kimonos made of silk)

“The young master here is so cute. How old is he?”

The owner asked.

“He’s only half a year old. His name is Rihan. Written as koi’s friend.”

Kokehime answered first, and Youhime felt like she suddenly had a mature daughter at her side, and she felt herself relax.

After that, the two of them visited various kinds of shops. Shops selling straw sandals, shops selling lanterns, and they even walked past mobile merchants carrying huge bags. At the accessory shop, Kokehime seemed to be particularly enthusiastic as she was choosing pendants. The pendants are pieces of artworks which are tied to the ends of the strings on a coin pouch and looped around the belt to prevent the pouch from falling. This shop had many designs to choose from.

After spending quite some effort to choose a pendant...

“Youhime-san, I wish to give this one to Hitotsume Nyuudo-sama. Do you think he would like it?”

Kokehime asked Youhime shyly. The reason for inviting Youhime last night could simply be that she hoped that Youhime would be able to supply some ideas and opinions.

The dragon shaped pendant made from corals seemed to suit Hitotsume well. Seeing Youhime nod and expressing her agreement, Kokehime happily bought the pendant.

Youhime was not looking to buy anything in particular. She was satisfied with talking to Rihan occasionally and observing the lively surroundings around her.

Edo’s thriving scenery strongly showed to others the air of freedom and ambitions haboured by the people. Not being surrounded by youkai and experiencing a new environment felt refreshing. Youhime couldn’t help but think—being able to go outside is a good thing.

Seeing that Rihan was starting to doze off, Youhime suggested going to a tea house to rest. Both of them found a tea house rather quickly and they enjoyed sweet red bean buns there.

Leaving the teahouse once they have finished, Youhime naturally walked in the direction that would lead them back to the mansion. Even though she did not tell them when she would return, she still had Rihan with her, which meant that she could not stay outdoors for too long.

“I hope we would be able to do more next time.”

Kokehime said, her tone tinged with reluctance. Youhime felt the same way.

--Really. The next time, she hoped that she would be able to take a long stroll on the streets with Ayakashi-sama.

The moment she thought about that, Youhime became shy, a faint blush appearing on her cheeks.

When they passed by a large plaza, it was filled with a large audience. The two of them stopped in their tracks to see what was going on, and discovered that an entertainment stage was set up at the plaza. There were people performing various stunts and tricks and telling stories.

“Youhime-san...”

Kokehime held onto Youhime’s sleeve. Seeing that she didn’t dare to speak and her slouched form, it would seem like she wanted to stay and watch.

“That’s true.”

Youhime nodded.

--Taking a short look...should be a problem, right?

It was just past the eighth quarter (2pm). Rushing back after taking a small look wouldn’t cause them to return home too late, right?

When they returned to the mansion, it was long past the seventh quarter (4pm). A sideshow is not something that can be left after seeing a little of it. Every performance was very interesting, and it made people want to watch a little more, causing them to forget the time.

Both of them just took off their sandals at the porch, and they heard the Supreme Commander's voice from the corridor.

"Oh, you're back. Why did you return this late?"

Having gone out for so long, Youhime thought that she might be berated, and prepared herself for it, but the face of the Supreme Commander as he came close was full of smiles.

"Did Rihan behave himself?"

"Yes, he wasn't any trouble at all."

"Supreme Commander, I bought this."

Kokehime took out the pendant which she had bought.

"Not bad. Is it for Hitotsume?"

The Supreme Commander smiled mischievously. Kokehime blushed furiously in an instant, and ran quickly into the house.

"Don't fall down!" The Supreme Commander shouted from behind her. Youhime laughed lightly, and the Supreme Commander turned back once again.

Ayakashi-sama, there were sideshow performers—Youhime was prepared to say so, but the Supreme Commander spoke first,

"Gagoze came."

"Eh? Gagoze-sama?"

Gagoze was one of the subordinates. In charge of leading the corpse oni youkai, he is the leader of the Gagoze Alliance.

"That's the situation, so let me borrow Rihan for a while."

After saying that, the Supreme Commander grabbed Rihan, kidnapping his own son.

"Ah, wait, Ayakahi-sama!"

"I want to show Rihan's crawling to Gagoze."

The Supreme Commander said as he turned towards the corridor, walking back towards the hall. Youhime chased after him quickly.

Seeing the Supreme Commander enter while carrying Rihan in a less than gentle manner, Gagoze and the other youkai exclaimed with a "Oh", causing a small wave of cheers.

"Rihan-sama is already so big. Oh, Youhime-san, you look well too."

Gagoze said with smile to Youhime who had entered.

After rejoining Gagoze, the Supreme Commander put Rihan on the tatami immediately, letting him rest on his stomach.

“Come Rihan, crawl to where Gagoze is.”

The Supreme Commander patted Rihan bottom once, urging his son to do so. This scene was the repeat of what happened a few days ago.

But it could be because it was tiring going out, Rihan only lay on the floor, and he was starting to curl up.

“Hey, Rihan, what’s wrong?”

“Ayakashi-sama...”

Youhime couldn’t take it anymore and said,

“Rihan must be sleepy. Don’t force him...”

“It’s only for a while, there’s no problem. Isn’t that right, Rihan?”

After saying that, the Supreme Command pushed Rihan’s bottom again. Seeing this scene, Youhime clenched her hands.

At that moment, Rihan finally started to cry. But the Supreme Commander did not pick Rihan up, and let him sit on the floor.

“What do you think? My son is quite big now, right?”

Nurarihyon said to Gagoze confidently.

“That’s right. It’s only been a while, and he can already lift his head on his own, he’s becoming more beautiful too. It looks like it won’t be long before Rihan-sama *goes out to fight*.”

“That’s absolutely right. If such a small baby started to scream and shout, the enemy will be so scared that he’ll pee in his pants!”

Hearing the Supreme Commander’s joke, Gagoze started to laugh loudly. At that moment, Youhime’s patience reached her limit. The youkai’s uncaring laughter was the last straw, causing the already troubled youkai to explode in an instant.

“Ayakashi-sama!”

Youhime’s angry shout was so loud, it was as if the whole of Edo could hear it.

Rihan, who was crying the whole time, stopped doing so instantly. But he continued crying loudly not long after.

“You...youhime, what’s wrong with you?”

There was an expression of shock on Nurarihyon’s face as he turned towards her and asked.

“You still ask me what’s wrong! How many times do I have to say this to Ayakashi-sama before you understand!”

“What?”

“Why are you always so rough to Rihan? Even though the child is healthy, he is still a baby!”

“Ah...sorry. I just did it without thinking...”

“Also, what is the meaning of bring Rihan out to fight?”

"It's... it's just a joke. Besides, Rihan's still young and wouldn't understand what we're saying. You're thinking too much."

"Even though he can't understand, it would still affect his emotional development! Even though today..."

At this point, Youhime swallowed her words, but she couldn't hold it in and said,

"Even though I was finally able to take Rihan out for an enjoyable walk today, and allow him to experience the vitality of Edo... Ayakashi-sama is too neglectful of Rihan. Don't you want Rihan to have a rich soul?"

"Of course I do, I want Rihan to become an inspiring and open minded man."

"If so, then be more mindful of Rihan. You have to pay attention to his physical and mental state, his soul especially. It's about time for him to experience the crowds in the city..."

"Okay, I understand!"

The Supreme Commander brought his fist down to his palm.

"In the end, we just have to let Rihan interact more with the city right? Okay, I know. Hey! You lot!"

The Supreme Commander shouted towards Gagoze and the rest.

"Mobilise the Nura Gumi, and gather the Hyakki Yako! Let's roam the streets of Edo with Rihan!"

"Oh, good idea!"

"It's not a good idea at all!"

The Youhime mountain started to spit fire once more. She stomped on the tatami heavily, and glared at her husband with teary eyes.

"That was not what I meant! I'm so angry!"

Youhime picked up Rihan, who was still crying, and left the hall.

"Ah, hey, Youhime!"

Youhime ignored her husband's shout from behind, and arrived at the corridor.

Several of the subordinates from the Nura Gumi and youkai from other groups have gathered in the corridor, with Karasu Tengu at the front. Hitotsume and Kokehime were standing there as well, with worried looks on their faces. A abnormal voice was heard from the hall, and it seemed like something bad was happening, causing the youkai to come here to find out what was wrong.

"Erhm... Youhime-sama, may I know..."

Karasu Tengu started to ask nervously. Youhime replied,

"Rihan will only continue crying if I stay here. I'm going to go out again!"

Chapter 4

Leaving the mansion, Youhime walked in the opposite direction, away from the city. There weren't many shops and people around, but currently, Youhime did not want to stay in a lively area.

While she was walking, Youhime was so upset that she wanted to cry, Rihan was also crying loudly in her arms.

However, when Youhime stopped occasionally to play with Rihan using the feather toy which Karasu Tengu made, and Rihan started to calm down slowly, she started to regret her earlier actions.

--I was too harsh just now.

When she calmly recalled what she said to her husband earlier, she was so regretful that her chest felt tight.

These issues could have been phrased in a more suitable manner, and she should be more mindful of the timing and location as well.

But in the end, she has pushed all her frustrations onto her husband without considering anything.

I should return and apologise properly. When Youhime made her decision, she realized that the sky had turned dark.

When she returned from the city to the mansion, the sky was still bright, but it was now tinged with gray.

There was a small river next to her. It looks like she had walked quite some distance, and she was far away from the mansion.

Just as Youhime was about to turn around and return, she heard a soft crying sound.

It sounded like a baby's cry. Rihan had already stopped crying, so that meant that the crying came from another baby, and the sound was coming from the direction of the river.

--What happened?

Youhime hesitated for a while, but in the end, she readjusted her hold on Rihan and walked in the direction of the cries.

Chapter 5

"Sigh...this is bad."

Hitotsume said as he sighed.

In the hall without Youhime, a group of subordinates were currently standing around their Supreme Commander.

"Did I...say anything wrong?"

Gagoze said, as he looked depressed and small.

"No, it's not your fault, don't worry about it."

The Supreme Commander replied. At that moment, they heard another voice,

"That's right, the one with a problem is you."

Turning around, they saw Setsura, who was about to enter the hall.

"Setsura, you heard it as well?"

"Such a serious volcanic eruption can be heard from anywhere. That woman is so pitiful. She must have held it in for a very long time. With such a dense husband, it's obvious that she'll have a hard time"

"Are you saying that I'm dense?"

"Isn't it true? Treating your own child so roughly, unable to read the atmosphere, and always talking about youkai and Yakuza related topics, even that woman like her would lose her temper, right? Seriously, you're just an idiot."

“Shut up! Aren’t you also--”

“Stop!”

Setsura suddenly interrupted the Supreme Commander’s rebuttal, and said calmly,

“If you have the time to argue with me, you should use that time to chase after her instead. The skies turn dark quickly during this time of the year. And the brat is with her as well, it would be bad if she gets kidnapped.”

“... ..”

Hearing Setsura’s warning, the Supreme Commander knitted his brows in worry.

“That can’t be possible?” Karasu Tengu said, cutting into their conversation.

“Being kidnapped is too exaggerated. Youhime-san just left the house...”

But that caused Hitotsume to shout back in anger,

“Bastard! What if something bad really happened?!”

“Hitotsume is right.”

The Supreme Commander nodded.

“Everyone, can you split up and search? I will be going as well.”

Once he said that, the Supreme Commander ran out of the hall like a bullet.

“Wait a moment! Supreme Commander!”

Karasu Tengu’s shouts were ignored.

“Hey hey, is it good to let the Supreme Commander go by himself?”

Hitotsume asked sternly.

“That guy is really troublesome...”

Setsura sighed lightly and left the hall.

“Hey, let’s go search...”

“I know.”

Karasu Tengu did not wait for Hitotsume to finish and walked into the corridor. Seeing the Supreme Commander’s expression, Karasu Tengu cannot let him be idle at longer. He immediately summoned the members who were in the corridor and asked them to spread the new of the summon.

Very quickly, all the youkai in the mansion were gathered in the main hall.

Karasu Tengu quickly issued the order to search for Youhime-san and Rihan-sama, and split them into groups.

Actually, when Karasu Tengu was issuing the orders, he had hoped that the both of them would return suddenly at that time, however he was disappointed when he finished giving his orders. This situation just made Karasu Tengu more nervous as time passed by.

After Hitotsume ran out of the mansion with a few members in tow, Karasu Tengu left the mansion as well. He first flew to the skies above the mansion, observing the skies around him, and as expected, he saw a large snake floating

in the skies far away. The large snake was carrying the Supreme Commander and Setsura and flying away from the city. Seeing that the other members were heading towards the city, Karasu Tengu decided to follow the large snake, and moved forward to meet up with it.

When the Supreme Commander saw Karasu Tengu meeting up with them, he only gave a nod.

When the sky turned from red to dark blue, Karasu Tengu felt more uneasy. For now, they can still see well, but it will gradually turn dark from now on. Karasu Tengu was currently holding a lantern youkai by its handle.

A woman should not be able to walk that far, especially if she is carrying an infant. If they were kidnapped, then it was another matter altogether.

The procession of youkai searched along the many roads in the commercial and residential areas. Their surroundings were quiet.

“There’s not even one normal human on the streets, let alone that woman.”

“If only we’re able to hear Rihan-sama crying right now...”

Setsura and Karasu Tengu said as they stared at the ground with their eyes wide open. But the Supreme Commander did not respond at all. He was focused on staring at the ground, trying to detect any movements.

The three youkai arrived at a small river. They can hear the soft sound of flowing water, but were unable to see even one soul. A gust of wind blew, causing the grass near the river to sway in response.

So she’s not here after all, we should go back to the city to search.

Just as Karasu Tengu was about to suggest turning back—

“Wait.”

Once he said that, the Supreme Commander jumped off the large snake. Since they weren’t flying at a high altitude, he won’t get hurt by jumping off directly. Setsura and Karasu Tengu followed suit.

The Supreme Commander knelt on one knee and picked up something. Between his fingers was a black feather.

“Supreme Commander, this is...”

Karasu Tengu’s eyes widened.

“I saw this being blown by the wind. Karasu Tengu, is this your feather?”

“Yes. Your eyes are really sharp.”

Even with the lantern youkai providing some light, it was still amazing that a black feather on the ground couldn’t escape the Supreme Commander’s detection.

“Now isn’t the time for admiration, did you pass by this area today?”

“No, I did not...”

“Then why would your feather be here?”

“I’m not sure about that...”

Karasu Tengu fell silent. Just then, Setsura let out an “Ah.”

“It’s that toy...!”

"That's right." The Supreme Commander nodded, and continued,

"This is the toy that was made from your feathers, the one that Rihan really likes. The feathers on top of it dropped here."

"Supreme Commander, this could mean..."

"Yeah, Youhime's been here."

The Supreme Commander nodded confidently. Setsura's voice was suddenly heard,

"Look, there's a feather there too!"

Under closer inspection, there was another feather a short distance away.

"Pass me the light."

Karasu Tengu passed the lantern youkai to the Supreme Commander. After picking up the second feather, they quickly found the third feather some distance away. These feathers were obviously dropped by Youhime, a very good clue. Therefore the youkai followed their Supreme Commander, who was holding the light, and made their way forwards, picking up the feathers as they went. The large snake followed behind them from the sky.

The distance between the dropped feathers started to increase.

After picking up the tenth feather, the group of youkai arrived at a small village sparsely populated by a few simple houses. There were a few houses with smoking chimneys, but there were many other houses which did not have smoking chimneys.

There were still feathers on the ground. As they moved forward following the feathers, they heard the cries of a baby.

Compared to the other houses, the small house in front of them was considerably older and rundown. In addition, this small house was situated quite some distance away from the other houses, like it had been excluded from the others. Light can be seen from the small gap under the door, and the cries of a baby throwing a tantrum could be heard from there. Starting from the small house, there were no more feathers in front of them.

--I wonder how many people are inside?

Karasu Tengu thought.

Thinking that there might be powerful youkai inside, Karasu Tengu started to get nervous.

Setsura and him were with the Supreme Commander, so there shouldn't be any problems. However, if Hitotsume and the rest were here, it would be more reassuring. But Hitotsume was searching in the city.

The Supreme Commander turned around and nodded, expressing his intent to enter the house. After Karasu Tengu and Setsura nodded simultaneously, the Supreme Commander placed his hand on the door without hesitation, and opened the door in one go.

"Youhime! Rihan! Are both of you alright?"

The Supreme Commander said as he strode into the small house. Karasu Tengu and Setsura entered the house as well.

The interior of the house was as simple as its exterior. There was a raised platform on the floor and the house wasn't really that small in terms of size, but it did not have any fancy furniture. There was only a straw mat with frayed

straw ends and a thin cotton blanket on the platform. There was a baby lying on that blanket, and he was crying loudly, but it wasn't Rihan.

Next to the blanket sat Youhime, who was carrying Rihan, and a woman who seemed to be the baby's mother. That was everyone in the house.

"Ayakashi-sama!"

Youhime shouted. Her expression was cheerful, and did not show signs like she had been dragged here or threatened.

"Youhime, this woman is..."

The Supreme Commander looked towards the woman. The woman looked like she was about twenty years old. She placed both hands on the floor, and bowed, showing deep respect towards him.

Chapter 6

The woman and Youhime explained what had happened.

The woman is the baby's mother, like they had thought. Because her son couldn't stop crying, she could only try to placate him and found her way to the river while doing so, then she suddenly realized that there was something wrong with the way her baby was crying. Two or three days ago, her baby started to throw up, which meant that he could be sick. But the woman did not have any money to see a doctor and no one to rely on for help.

Her son cried continuously, and his condition worsened. The woman was very anxious, but she could do nothing except continue comforting her son. Just as she was at her wits end, Youhime, carrying Rihan, had passed by at that moment.

Seeing that the baby was seriously ill, Youhime had immediately asked where the woman lived. And she found out that instead of going back to the Nura Gumi mansion, it would be faster if they went back to the woman's house.

Youhime had a healing gift. She had hoped to find a quiet environment quickly in order to help the woman with her ability. However, as to how much time she would need in order to improve the condition of the infant, she was not sure about it at all. If she spent a long time at the woman's place to treat the baby, the youkai at the mansion will definitely be very worried.

Then Youhime thought of something, she could make use of Karasu Tengu's feathers on the toy, but leaving black feathers on a dark road, Youhime was really worried if it would really be noticed. But in such a dire situation, she couldn't think of a better method.

Fortunately, Youhime's healing abilities had produced results and the baby regained his health quickly. After the pains of the illness receded, the baby was able to drink milk. As the woman and Youhime explained the current situation to the Supreme Commander, the baby started to fall asleep, breathing steadily.

After hearing what had happened, the Supreme Commander nodded fervently.

"So that was what happened. Fortunately, it was a kidnapping or a disappearance. I'm reassured if it's just this."

"That is...Ayakashi-sama...I really apologise for before."

Youhime apologized, embarrassed. Not only did she lose her temper and ran out of the mansion, the Supreme Commander also ran after her regardless of everything, and she felt guilty, yet happy about it.

"As long as you and Rihan are safe, it's fine."

The Supreme Commander smiled, and then he turned towards the woman.

“You too, your child recovered fully, that’s great.”

He said.

“I really don’t know how to repay the both of you. This kindness, this humble one will never forget it.”

The woman bowed her head to thank them once more. Then she asked the Supreme Commander,

“Mister, you don’t seem to come from a Samurai family...may I ask who you are?”

“Me? I am the husband of Youhime over there. Everyone calls me Nurarihyon. The ruler of youkai, Lord of Pandemonium.”

Seeing the Supreme Commander announce his youkai identity so easily, Karasu Tengu was shocked.

“Ah! Wait! Supreme Commander! Why did you say that you’re a youkai to humans! Madam, he’s lying to you, it’s a joke!”

Just as he said that, the Supreme Commander told him rather coldly,

“Say, Karasu Tengu, aren’t you the same as well? A crow which can suddenly talk, aren’t you revealing that you’re a youkai too?”

“Ah! That’s...that’s true!”

Karasu Tengu jerked backwards. Setsura couldn’t help but mumble under her breath “What an idiot”.

Then, Karasu Tengu frantically tried to explain to the woman,

“Ugh, but you don’t have to be afraid. We are really youkai, but the youkai of the Nura Gumi will definitely not harm or tease and humans just for fun. You don’t have to worry.”

“I don’t care about that.”

The woman smiled, nodding.

“Everyone is my son’s savior. Whether you’re human or youkai, I’m still thankful to all of you.”

“That’s good.”

Karasu Tengu breathed a sigh of relief, and repositioned himself to a proper seating position.

“Hey, how about your husband?”

Setsura suddenly said.

“... ..”

“You said that you didn’t have any money, and no one to help you, then how about your husband?”

They thought that the woman will continue her silence, but she finally raised her head after a while, and started to talk about her history.

The woman was once abandoned by her merchant boyfriend, and had a sad past. Her parents were no longer in this world, and she had no siblings, just a common serving girl in a tea shop. She then met a merchant’s son who was going to inherit his family business and the two of them became lovers. When the woman became pregnant, and she

told the news to the other party, the man rejected her proposal for marriage. It turned out that he already had a fiancée, and she was a merchant's daughter. Afterwards, he only gave her a sum of money as a compensation for breaking up, and married his fiancée as planned. The abandoned woman had no choice but to deliver the baby, hiding the fact from the man, and had been raising him by herself since then.

"That stinking man, he's too despicable!"

Setsura said in a raised volume due to anger.

"Getting involved with other women even though he already has a fiancée, then breaking up with her even he saw that the situation was bad, I hate men who mess around with women like that! Sigh, men are so unreliable. Those who cry in the end are always women, how pitiful."

The target of her anger changed from the merchant's son to all men, and Karasu Tengu coughed twice in response. Even though he did not think that he had done something so unforgiving, he was still a man. The Supreme Commander also felt that it was hard to speak under these circumstances and only crossed his arms, staring at the ceiling.

Currently, she was working at another teahouse, raising her son on her small salary. The woman said,

"Even though the days are hard, but as long as my son is with me, I can find the strength to live on. This child's father may be a useless person, but the children are innocent..."

The woman said as she gently stroked the hair of her soundly sleeping son.

When she was done with her story, the house was filled with silence. The woman seemed to sense that and said,

"I'm so sorry. Not only did you save me, you still had to listen to my boring story..."

"No no no, it's fine."

The Supreme Commander waved his hands and said.

"Your son has fully recovered, and I have found my wife. Isn't this a happy occasion?"

"That's right. If you have any problems in future, feel free to come to the mansion to find us!"

Setsura added.

"From the river where you were placating your son, just walk in the direction of the city, and you would reach our mansion."

"But you have to keep the youkai mansion a secret. And don't tell anyone that you met us tonight, understood?"

As a precaution, Karasu Tengu reminded her of this. The woman replied with an "Okay", and nodded, agreeing.

Just as the Supreme Commander said that it was about time for them to go, and the group of people from the Nura Gumi were about the stand up—

The door was opened roughly, and three men barged in. The three men did not look decent at all, and one could tell they were thugs with one look.

Another man appeared quickly from behind the three men. He looked like he had not reached thirty years of age. He was also wearing a rather expensive looking kimono.

"Shinji-san..."

The woman was shocked, and almost stopped breathing.

Chapter 7

“Riku, long time no see.”

The good looking man known as Shinji said, with the three thugs standing in front of him.

“Shinji-san, why have you come here?”

“I came here to look for you. I was afraid that something went wrong, so I did a little investigation, and I never expected the results to be like this. Riku, you’re really a scary woman. Giving birth to the child without telling me, and raising him secretly!”

From their conversation, the woman’s name should be Riku. And the merchant’s son who played around with Riku would be this man, Shinji.

The three thugs stood in a line in front, protecting this merchant’s son.

Inside the house, Setsura and the Supreme Commander stood in front of Youhime. Karasu Tengu hid in a dark corner, concealing his presence.

“Riku, give that brat to me.”

“You want me to give this child to you? Why..?”

“You’re dirt poor anyway, you won’t be able to raise this brat. From what I see, you’re just going to bring him to me when you have no more options to ask me for help! If things came to that, it would be troublesome.”

“How...how can this...I’ve never thought of doing such a thing...”

“That’s hard to say, there’s nothing which can’t happen in this world. The business is doing well now, and my family is well adjusted, if you come and cause trouble, I may not be able to survive the consequences.”

“We don’t have anything to do with one another anymore.”

“I also think that there’s nothing between us anymore. But once I remember that the brat is still alive, I can’t sleep easy. And he might come and blackmail me once he’s grown up. That’s how things are, now hand the brat over. I want to get rid of him personally.”

Riku held her son tightly, and shuffled backwards.

“No! I definitely won’t hand my son over!”

“Stupid woman! Hand him over obediently, or else you’ll face the wrath of these men.”

Shinji said. The three men moved forward, intending to scare Riku.

Just then—

“You bastards who deserve to die, know your place!”

The Supreme Commander shouted angrily, and executed a flying kick at Shinji at the same time. Shinji, who was sent flying backwards, hit his head against the wall, and slumped onto the floor. The thugs were scared stiff and froze where they stood, not moving one muscle.

Shinji supported himself against the wall, and stood up with a lot of effort.

"You...damn you! Why did you kick me?!"

Shinji shouted, banishing his claws and fangs. But—

"You're noisy. Shut up."

The Supreme Commander only said this in return, in a stern tone.

"Hey, you're called Shinji, right. Can you still call yourself a man? A father? Afraid that your son will blackmail you later, so you have to take the chance now to get rid of him? Who are you kidding?!"

The Supreme Commander said.

"Da!"

Rihan, in Youhime's arms, started to make loud noises as well.

"Heh, my son is angry too. Listen well, Rihan, even if you walk down the wrong path later in life, don't ever become a man who is beyond redemption like him, understand?"

"That's your son?"

Shinji said as he split out the blood in his mouth and continued,

"Hmph, you have a son too. Okay then, I only wanted to get rid of Riku's son, but it looks like it wouldn't take too much effort. I think I'll get rid of your son as well."

"The one who will be gotten rid of is you."

The Supreme Commander's tone became more threatening. Just then, Riku suddenly ran towards the door.

The attention of the thugs and Shinji were shifting towards the Supreme Commander. Riku noticed this, and wanted to take the chance to escape.

Riku ran past the thugs, and used her body to shove Shinji away as he was blocking the door. However, Shinji only swayed a little, and Riku did not accomplish her objective. He grabbed Riku's wrist and said,

"Heh, don't think you can escape. You're really dangerous, I can't let down my guard around you."

A cruel smile surfaced on Shinji's face.

"Shinji-san, let's get rid of him now."

One of the thugs said, and drew a dagger out of his clothes.

"Yeah. Hey, the rest of you better be compliant, don't make any unnecessary movements!"

Shinji helped to control the Supreme Commander and the others, while the thugs drew daggers out of their sheaths. Riku shouted in alarm, and curled up. The baby followed suit, crying loudly.

"...You bastards, don't you dare go overboard."

The Supreme Commander said. His tone did not vary very much, and his voice was cold. It can be felt that the Supreme Commander's fury had reached his limit.

"The actions of you bastards cannot be overlooked anymore."

"Stop with your nagging over there! You better stay put as well, or else your precious son will die as well!"

“Shinji-san, this is too much trouble. Let’s shut that guy up first.”

The thug holding the dagger said. Shinji nodded.

“That’s true. Then do it.”

After receiving the order, the other two thugs also banished their daggers. Sounds of daggers leaving their sheath were heard in the house.

The thugs stooped, and slowly approached the Supreme Commander. Despite being surrounded by three daggers, the tone of the Supreme Commander’s voice still held some amusement,

“The few of you better aim properly when using weapons. Don’t wave it around aimlessly just because *you can’t see the enemy*, you won’t be able to even cut the shadow.”

The Supreme Commander stepped forward. It suddenly turned dark indoors.

“What’s happening?”

The thugs shouted frantically.

The house was filled with dense youki. All the light in the house was blocked, this was the precursor to the release of Nurarihyon’s fear.

“Well, come cut me.”

The Supreme Commander challenged and the three thugs hesitated. But one of the more senior thugs seemed to have thrown all caution into the wind. He suddenly let out a strange scream and rushed towards the Supreme Commander.

The thug’s body collided with the Supreme Commander, but this instant was only an illusion.

Just as the blade cut the Supreme Commander, the Supreme Commander’s body dissolved and disappeared into the darkness.

The thug hit empty air and was kicked by the Supreme Commander, who had appeared somewhere else, and he was sent flying.

“Didn’t I tell you to aim properly?”

The Supreme Commander landed on the ground, and smiled, pleased with himself.

The two remaining thugs were also taken care of by the Supreme Commander using the same method—they rushed to kill the enemy with a cry, but hit air. Then they were hit with a kick, and fell to the ground—in a short amount of time, the wall next to the door was stacked with three unconscious thugs.

Losing his underlings so suddenly, Shinji was shaking all over as he retreated towards the door.

“Wa...wait! Spare me! I won’t cause trouble for the child again!”

“You rotten thing! Changing your stance when you’re the only one left, aren’t you being too idealistic?!”

Saying that, the Supreme Commander disappeared. Then, he appeared in front of the door. In order to prevent Shinji from escaping, the Supreme Commander reached the door first.

Shinji shouted in fear with a “Yi”.

“You did so many bad things, shouldn’t you be prepared for this?”

“No...I don’t want...that’s right! Riku! I’ll give you money! You need money to raise the child right? I’ll give you as much as you want, please ask them to let me off!”

However, Riku just continued to kneel in the corner, off the platform, not meeting Shinji’s eyes at all. The baby just continued crying.

“Even your wife and son are ignoring you. No one cares about your stinking money.”

“Then...then how about I give them to you! I’ll give you money! Please spare my life!”

“Don’t joke with me, you bastard!”

The Supreme Commander glared at him.

“This guy is too rotten. It looks like if I don’t beat you up, you’ll never change your ways.”

The Supreme Commander lifted up his foot and moved forward.

Just then, Shinji jumped on the platform in one movement, and stretched his devil hands towards Youhime. All this happened in an instant.

“Youhime!”

As the Supreme Commander shouted, a dagger appeared in Shinji’s right hand, his left hand grabbing Rihan, blankets and all. Then he kicked Youhime in her waist area. Youhime fell backwards with a scream, and was caught by Setsura.

After increasing the distance between him and the Supreme Commander, Youhime and the rest, Shinji raised Rihan high in the air, pointing the blade at the baby, and said threateningly,

“Hey! If you want me to return this brat, then hand over Riku and the child first!”

Even though he was being treated roughly, the surprising thing was that Rihan did not cry at all, and stared at the blade, a confused look on his face. Acting so calm under such a dangerous situation, this child isn’t really what he seemed—it was only a moment, but such a thought inappropriate for the situation flashed through Karasu Tengu’s mind.

“You scoundrel! Release Rihan!”

The Supreme Commander took one step forward.

“Hey! Don’t move!”

Shinji waved the dagger.

“I’m serious! As long as I want to, I’ll be able to do it! Don’t think that I will not play rough just because I’m a merchant’s son, don’t look down on me! I want all of you to see that I can do it as well! I’ll show all of you now!”

Shinji raised his right hand, which was holding the dagger. A silver light flashed through the air, and the tip of the blade looked like it was going to pierce the cotton blankets wrapped around Rihan.

Just then, an unbelievable thing occurred—

Shinji’s dagger swerved, and stabbed his own arm.

Shinji screamed, and the pain caused him to throw Rihan outwards.

“Rihan!”

The Supreme Commander shouted as he rushed forward. Rihan, by a lucky chance, landed on his father's body.

"Rihan! Ayakashi-sama!"

Youhime, who reacted slightly later, ran to the side of her husband and son. The Supreme Commander hugged Rihan and stood up, embracing Youhime.

"It hurts! It freaking hurts!" Shinji kept moaning in pain. But it seemed like he had not forgotten about his plan to run away, as he stumbled towards the door.

The door was wide open, but Shinji bumped into something and was unable to move forward.

There was someone standing in the shadows of the doorway.

"You can't escape."

The person standing in the darkness spoke. The man blocking the doorway had a large build. He stepped into the house, showing his face. It was Hitotsume, with a pipe in his mouth.

"... ..!"

Shinji was scared into silence, and backed up. The ones who came weren't just Hitotsume, other youkai started to appear inside the house. Including the other subordinates like Gagoze and Hihi, youkai of varying sizes started to gather.

--Oh...someone had informed them about the situation.

Karasu Tengu thought to himself as he looked at the house full of youkai.

The large snake and lantern youkai were waiting outside the whole time. The youkai who returned to the mansion and informed them of the location could be these two youkai.

"Wah! Wahhh...!"

Shinji forgot about the pain in his arm, and crawled one way, before crawling to another place, trying to escape the youkai indoors. However, this house, which was meant to accommodate a mother and her son, could be rather spacious for their needs, but is quite a squeeze for a Hundred Demons. The home was enveloped in the youki produced by the youkai. Shinji, with no place to run, could only hide in the corner, sniffing in a space no larger than half a tatami.

The Supreme Commander led the youkai who appeared from the darkness, holding Rihan with one arm.

"Hey, bastard."

He threatened.

"Do you see this Hundred Demons? I am Nura Gumi's Supreme Commander, the one who leads these Hundred Demons, Nurarihyon. You're really bold, raising a hand to my wife and son, how do you intend to answer to this? Hmm?"

Once the Supreme Commander said this, the eyes of the Hundred Demons lit up, producing an eerie glow.

"... .."

Shinji did not speak, and his moaning sounds have quietened. Karasu Tengu discovered the reason and said,

"It's no use, Supreme Commander. This guy has fainted."

Don't approach Riku and the child. If you don't keep your promise, the Parade of Hundred Demons will kill you—

After the Supreme Commander said this to Shinji and the thugs, he let them go. He actually wanted to teach all of them a harsh lesson, but Riku did not wish to see such a scene. In addition, just under the glares of the Hundred Demons, Shinji was so freaked out that he peed in his pants, couldn't close his mouth, his teeth chattering, there was no need to beat him up at all.

After that, the Supreme Commander told Riku that he would help mother and child arrange for a new place to stay, and they would be able to visit the mansion shortly. Even though it was unlikely that the scoundrels will come again, but it would be more reassuring for mother and child if they changed their place of residence. Hearing this, Riku choked up, and thanked the Supreme Commander profusely.

Youhime and Rihan finally returned to the mansion, restoring the peaceful nights.

"Ayakashi-sama, for causing you so much trouble today, I'm really sorry."

"Oh, it's fine."

The Supreme Commander and Youhime were in their bedroom. Rihan was sleeping soundly in his small bundle of blankets.

The smiling Supreme Commander was holding a wine cup with some snacks, while Youhime was holding the wine flask, refilling his cup, and the Supreme Commander finished the contents in one go. The two of them did not speak at all during this time, simply refilling the wine and drinking the wine repeatedly. Even though they did not converse, both of them were thinking about what happened today.

From the morning's outing with Youhime to night time, many things happened. Running out of the house after quarrelling with her husband, then getting into trouble with thugs at Riku's house, and in the confusion, the man who lost his temper had tried to hurt Rihan with a knife. That moment scared Youhime witless, but it was safely resolved in the end, and they returned to their peaceful days.

She wanted to let Rihan interact with ordinary humans and scenery, but she had let him see the ugly side of humans. Youhime thought to herself as she refilled her husband's wine cup.

The man who once cruelly dumped his girlfriend, then used despicable methods to cut away his past. The heart of this man was really ugly.

But thinking carefully, humans with such bad natures do exist in the world, it was a normal occurrence.

If they were overcome by greed, they will inevitably lose their sensibility and slowly become bad people. This is the same for both humans and youkai. Youhime remembered her father who died because of greed, and concluded this. In addition, these ugly situations cannot be avoided completely, it wasn't easy to live their lives by closing their eyes to such a thing.

Parents cannot just give what they wish to give to their child. Whatever happens around Rihan, should be felt by him.

Interacting too much with youkai, means that he should interact with humans more—now that she thought about it, this sort of thinking was too narrow, and unrealistic.

The streets of Edo which she walked through with Rihan, weren't they filled with the liveliness, peacefulness and freedom which were developed naturally?

Growing up naturally is the best way. It's the same for children and parents, growing up happily and naturally is enough.

Thinking about this, Youhime laughed softly.

“Hmm? What are you laughing about?”

The Supreme Commander asked.

“No, nothing.”

Youhime answered, but she couldn't help but laugh softly again. For unknown reasons, her heart had opened up and become cheerful, filled with happiness.

What she was thinking of earlier did not need to be explained in detail to her husband. As long as they can be safe like this, her family will only become happier.

“Ah, that's reminds me, Ayakashi-sama.”

“Hmm?”

Youhime subconsciously recalled something. It was the thing that happened when that man known as Shinji tried to hurt Rihan.

Shinji, who had lost all reason, was about to stab Rihan, when the dagger in his hand suddenly changed direction, and stabbed his own arm.

This abnormal scene looked like some invisible power was controlling the dagger. A slip of the hand would not cause such a result.

“Even though Rihan was saved because of it...but it's really mysterious and inconceivable.”

“That's right. It's really strange.”

The Supreme Commander tilted his head to the side as he said so. After a while, it seemed like he thought of something, and said loudly,

“Youhime, that could be Rihan's 'fear'!”

“Fear...?”

“Yeah, you can see it but can't touch it, Nurarihyon's fear.”

“You're saying that Rihan can execute Nurarihyon's technique? How is that possible...”

Youhime's eyes widened, and glanced to Rihan sleeping next to her. Rihan's chest was moving up and down, sleeping quietly.

--A baby, who is not even one year old, can utilise fear?

“Ayakashi-sama...that's really not possible?”

“Why not, he is our child. Being able to use fear now isn't that strange?”

“But, Rihan is only...”

As she was about to finish her sentence, she felt herself being hugged around her shoulders.

“Ah...Ayakashi-sama...?”

A faint blush covered Youhime's face.

“Okay, let’s not care if that was Rihan’s fear...Youhime, I seem to be drunk.”

The Supreme Commander said as he moved his face towards her. His clear gaze held some amusement, and was attractive to look at. The atmosphere between the two of them started to heat up.

“Ayakashi-sama...”

Youhime hesitated for a while, but decided to close her eyes in the end, accepting him. The Supreme Commander’s face drew closer. Their noses were about to touch.

“Wah! Wah!”

At that moment, Rihan started to cry loudly. Youhime and the Supreme Commander let go of each other quickly.

Rihan waved his limbs around, crying with all his might. He was sleeping so soundly just before, and now his face was red and all scrunched up. The loving atmosphere between husband and wife dissipated, but replacing it was another type of happiness.

“Oi oi, Nidaime, I’m begging you, read the atmosphere.”

Seeing her husband’s helpless expression, Youhime found it very hilarious and laughed, covering her mouth as she did so.

Next to the crying Rihan was a toy, missing a lot of its feathers.

~End~

Story 2: Record of Stay in Toono

The sounds of practice can be heard in the home of Toono.

The cut surface of a large tree is the location of their practice duels. Itaku and Rikuo, each with their own specialized weapons, were pointing their blades at one another, repeatedly engaging in duels.

Even though it is a large tree trunk that had been cut down, but its actual size is abnormal. The width of the cut surface is many times larger than a sumo wrestling ring. This place is the battlefield for the two of them.

Itaku is holding sickles in both hands, while Rikuo is holding a wooden stick. On Itaku's back is a wooden holder specially made to hold his weapons, and there are four more sickles inside. Freely manipulating any of the six sickles, this is Itaku's way of fighting.

Rikuo's attack using the wooden stick was blocked by the handle of the sickle. Itaku blocked the attack and went on the offensive. He used the sickle in his left hand to deflect Rikuo's wooden stick and swung the sickle in his right hand towards Rikuo's shoulder. The blade of the sickle, which was polished until it shone, cut through Rikuo's body, but it's only an illusion. The illusion of the body cut open at the shoulder became more indistinct, and vanished into the air.

Can be seen but cannot be cut, this is the 'Hatsu' technique which Rikuo learnt in Toono. Rikuo had said that the technique was called "Kyoka Suigetsu". It meant the reflection of the moon in the water—it can be seen by cannot be touched. So that's how it is. The name does suit the characteristics of Nurarihyon's techniques, Itaku thought.

--Only one day has passed, and he can use it so well now...

Itaku swung his weapons around, as a small smile appeared on his face.

The first time Rikuo used "Hatsu" was yesterday. Three days ago, when Rikuo was first brought to Tonoo, he didn't even have any concept of what "Hatsu" was, let alone use it.

After that, Rikuo suddenly learnt this technique. Itaku thought that it most likely had something to do with when he got attacked yesterday. The sudden danger forced Rikuo to grow and develop his potential.

Yesterday, Rikuo was attacked by the Kyoto youkai. The youkai who attacked were Kidomaru from Kyoto and his subordinates.

The reason why Kidomaru came to Tonoo was to ask for some fighting power from Akagappa. After Hagoromo Gitsune resurrected in Kyoto, plans were made for her to stand on top of the youkai world once more. Kidomaru and the other youkai, as part of Hagoromo Gitsune's faction, naturally have to help with gathering forces.

However, Akagappa refused Kidomaru's request. Tonoo youkai have always remained neutral. There was no need to help Kyoto's Hagoromo Gitsune; that was Akagappa's opinion.

After the breakdown in negotiations, Kidomaru and the rest found Rikuo, who was working hard at his odd jobs. Hagoromo Gitsune held a grudge against Nurarihyon for 400 years, so he would definitely not forgot the face of Nurarihyon. So, Kidomaru attacked Rikuo immediately.

Rikuo was attacked, and Itaku, who was maintaining his sickles at that time, sensed it very quickly. Feeling the flow and change in youki in the village was as natural to Itaku as breathing, since he had lived there for a long time. He immediately ran to the place where the enemies youki might be. On the way there, there was only one thought on Itaku's mind.

---If I don't hurry over, Rikuo will be killed.

He thought. If enemies from outside have entered the village, it meant that these youkai knew how to cut Fear. Tonoo had a barrier made out of Fear as protection. To enter Tonoo, the barrier had to be cut to create a crack, which would be the entrance. Rikuo still did not know how to cut through Fear, so he would naturally be unable to defeat any opponents who could go past the barrier.

After Itaku rushed to Rikuo's side, he cut off one of the youkai's arms immediately. There were three enemies from Kyoto altogether. He planned to take down all the enemies by himself, and had already prepared himself mentally for it. However, from the results, Itaku's help ended there. Very quickly, Rikuo executed his first "Hatsu". That is Nurarihyon's "Hatsu"---Kyoka Suigetsu.

Can be seen but cannot be cut or touched. Rikuo's 'Kyoka Suigetsu' confused Kidomaru and his comrades greatly. During that time, Reira, Awashima and their comrades have also rushed to the scene. However, there was no battle. In the end, Kidomaru called back his troops and left. It was not because they were afraid of Rikuo, Itaku and the rest, but they may have found it meaningless if they continued to fight here, so they left.

Seeing those youkai retreat before the escalation of the battle, Itaku, who loved to fight, thought that it was a pity. Putting Rikuo's future into consideration though, this result was something to be thankful for. His role as a teacher and mentor caused Itaku to be able to react calmly to such situations. This was his mindset as he analysed what had happened before.

The effectiveness of Rikuo's first "Hatsu" was very good, but his fighting techniques as a youkai were still unpolished. If the battle continued yesterday, Rikuo would definitely be seriously hurt. Those youkai had chosen to retreat before such a situation occurred, it was a good stroke of luck.

The speed of Rikuo's growth was amazing, and he was enthusiastic about practice, but he was still weak in terms of power, and he would definitely be rushing towards his death if he went to Kyoto now. This was Itaku's honest opinion of Rikuo.

---I won't let you die in Kyoto. If you are going to die, then die on the practice arena of Tonoo!

The two of them stood some distance apart on the practice arena, staring at each other. At that moment, Rikuo, holding the stick, left an opening in his stance. It could be that he lost his concentration because he was tired, but he had stopped his release of Fear. Actually making that mistake again, such an idiot---Itaku though as smirked.

Itaku was not a kind mentor, and would not pretend that did not see that scene. He raised the sickle in his right hand, coating the blade with his Fear, and swung forward. This is Itaku's "Hatsu"---Youkai Art "Wind Sickle".

The sickles released a sharp wind, flying towards Rikuo. Rikuo managed to barely evade it, but he did not completely dodge the attack, and was hit by the tail of the wind. A shallow cut was made on his chest area.

Rikuo was very surprised, and breathing heavily. Seeing his face, Itaku said,

"Rikuo, you should never disperse your Fear at any time. As long as you lose concentration, you'll die, understand?"

Rikuo nodded silently, and raised his stick once more.

Chapter 2

Even though training sessions to raise Rikuo's fighting ability were arranged, in actual fact, Rikuo would only be able to practice after he is done with his chores.

In one day, most of Rikuo's time is spent washing the clothes, cutting wood, cleaning the baths and heating the bath water. Itaku had never helped him with these chores at all.

Tonoo's leader, Akagappa, had given instructions not to give Rikuo any special treatment. When Rikuo's grandfather, Nurarihyon, entrusted his grandson to Akagappa, he had also told them not to be so reserved around Rikuo, and to make use of him as much as possible.

There is a flat huge rock jutting out from the side of the mountain. As usual, Itaku stood there observing Rikuo below, but that was all. Seeing Rikuo in a hard battle against the large amount of clothes, Itaku did not make any sound at all.

Washing the clothes is a very exhausting job. Tonoo is surrounded by mountains, and the rocks on the sides are covered in moss. The river at the bottom of the slope is where the clothes are washed, and sun drying the clothes is done by climbing up the steep slopes to the top. At the beginning, to someone who is not used to it, just climbing up the moss filled slopes and taking care not to slip, is a very difficult task.

"How is it? Does the grandson of Nurarihyon have any potential?"

A voice was heard from behind him. Turning his head, he saw Akagappa standing there.

"Akagappa-sama..."

The large body of Akagappa was quietly standing beside him, Itaku cast his gaze downwards once more.

"How do I put this... he's gotten a lot better at washing clothes."

"Heh heh, clothes washing, huh? How about his fighting skills?"

"It's not bad. And that guy has a lot of passion, he only wants to become stronger."

But Itaku said next,

"But it's still not good enough. He's still too weak now."

"How about Hatsu?"

"He does know, but right now he only knows how to use it. For this skill, it isn't enough just knowing how to use it, one needs to know how to use it based on the circumstances of the battle. If I had more time, I would really want to teach him all the techniques..."

"Yes. But that guy seems really eager to go to Kyoto."

"That's right...but it's really too early now. The Kyoto youkai are really strong. Even I want to battle against them."

"Are you talking about Kidomaru? The two youkai he brought with him seem to be quite strong too."

Akagappa had a serious expression on his face as he stroked his beard.

"I cut off the arm of one of the youkai."

Hearing what Itaku said, Akagappa laughed loudly.

"But, Kidomaru is different, he is especially strong."

Itaku continued. Akagappa closed his mouth.

"Yes, that is correct."

"The Fear he possessed, the quality and depth of it greatly exceeds that of a normal youkai. In addition, he had a strong sword swing and can calmly analyse the battle situation. He must be a very strong youkai."

“Kidomaru’s reputation is much better than during the Edo era, he is definitely strong. Even though his hair is greying, but the more experienced he is, the stronger he may be.”

After Akagappa said this, he nodded silently.

---Can I win?

Itaku thought to himself. Seeing such a good opponent, Itaku will ask himself this question. The result of this process of questioning himself has always remained the same.

---How would I know if I haven’t tried?

Facing the fight mentally prepared for the certainty of death will lead to a definite victory---Itaku will not think of such childish thoughts. This is not the attitude of a professional fighter.

Itaku started to imagine the battle scenario between him and Kidomaru. He did not have any fear in his heart, just a strong fighting spirit. He knew that his recklessness came from the nature of Tonoo youkai. The ninja youkai of Tonoo had the love of fights flowing in their blood.

“Itaku, do you want to go out and fight?”

Akagappa asked suddenly.

“Go out and fight?”

“Yes. Go with the grandson of Nurarihyon to Kyoto and fight together. Aren’t you thinking about this now?”

“With that guy? That’s not possible.”

Itaku denied it strongly.

I really want to leave Tonoo to test my skills---if Itaku had not have these thoughts before, then he is definitely lying. But these feelings have never been linked with Rikuo, at least that he what he thought.

“If I wish to fight together with someone, I would choose stronger youkai. That guy just learnt Hatsu, he is a total newbie. I don’t care if he is the young leader of the Nura Gumi, he’s just a young master who had lived in a good environment. Either way, I won’t become his comrade.”

“Oh? Why did you suddenly say bad things about him?”

“Those are my true thoughts.”

“I used to be like you as well.”

Akagappa was staring something far away. Itaku turned to look at him.

“Before, when that guy’s grandfather came, I was like you, with no good feelings for him...I acknowledge that he is strong, but that mouth of his was too arrogant, he was always talking about his magnificence. At that time, I was thinking, who does that Nurarihyon think he is?”

Itaku nodded.

“But I got conquered in the end.”

“Conquered?”

“He had a certain charisma, and that aura. It was those two things that made me submit.”

“That can’t be? You can actually submit to someone?”

Akagappa nodded, confirming this.

“I wanted to follow that man---even though very few people in the world could make me feel this way, but people like that do exist. That would be that guy’s grandfather.”

Akagappa pointed towards Nurarihyon’s grandson. At that time, Rikuo did not know that such a conversation was taking place a long distance above him, and was working hard at the washing board in the laundry area.

“Nurarihyon is that sort of man. If I wasn’t the leader at that time, I might have gone with him then.”

“Gone with him...”

Itaku said to himself while watching Rikuo.

---Would I follow such a weak man?

That’s not possible. Itaku still couldn’t help but steer his answer towards the negative stance.

Just then, Akagappa continued speaking.

“It doesn’t matter, you might not be attracted to him just like me. But he is still the grandson of Nurarihyon in the end. He might just intrude into your heart without you knowing, just like what his grandfather did to me.”

After Akagappa said so with a smile, he left Itaku’s side.

Itaku stayed frozen on his spot for a long while. The phrase “intrude into your heart” gave him a bad feeling.

Itaku stared at Rikuo with an expression that was close to anger, turning over the thoughts in his head.

Chapter 3

The chore of cutting wood still gives Rikuo a hard time.

It was supposed to be just a simple task of repeatedly swinging the axe such that the blocks of wood are cut into two, however the amount there was to cut was too much.

After that, Rikuo found that he shouldn’t rely on physical strength to cut it, and make use of the axe’s weight, causing his task to become much easier after that. But before learning that, he had spent a lot of time doing it.

Doing the laundry, cleaning the baths and heating the water was the same. Even though he was getting better at it compared to when he first started, but he was still stuck doing these chores for most of the day.

---Is it okay for me to continue doing this? I should be spending more time practicing battle techniques...

Since the first day, Rikuo had suppressed such feelings in his heart. And after he almost grasped the technique of “Kyoka Suigetsu”, the feeling had grown stronger.

If it was possible, he would rather cancel all his apprentice chores, and spend the whole day training. His Hatsu is still imperfect, and he wanted to train his other skills as well. However, the group of youkai with Itaku and the rest would not allow Rikuo to do so. Unless he finished all his apprentice chores, he was not allowed to step into the practice arena.

To Rikuo, who wished to hurry and train his battling techniques, every chore was like a battle against his own anxiety. However, they was one person in Tonoo who would cause Rikuo a lot of frustration.

---That damn Dohiko!

Rikuo cursed as he chopped the wood.

The Futtachi called Dohiko is a very detestable guy. Futtachi are animals who gradually turn into youkai. Tonoo's Futtachi are either apes or canines (wolves).

Dohiko is an ape Futtachi. He's always getting the way of Rikuo's work.

The incident occurred yesterday. As Rikuo was carrying the bag full of washed clothes, and was about to climb up the rocks, a fruit suddenly flew out of the trees nearby, and it wasn't only one fruit. Successive pieces of fruit were thrown, and they fell from the sky like rain.

Rikuo, who was surprised, slipped and fell downwards. Even though he landed on his back, he wasn't hurt badly. But when Rikuo saw that the clean clothes fly out from the bag and get dirtied by the mud, he flared up. Just then, laughter was heard from above him.

Looking upwards, Dohiko was sitting on a large branch protruding out from the forest. The surrounding branches also held a lot of other Futtachi, they were either sitting on the branch or hanging from it, and were most likely Dohiko's companions.

"Rikuo, that won't do. How did you end up falling in such an ungraceful manner?"

Dohiko said as he threw another fruit towards Rikuo. The fruit hit the back of his hand, and Rikuo can't help but shout back,

"Dohiko! What are you doing! I have to wash this again because of you!"

However, Dohiko only gave a silly smile, and seemed to have no intention of apologising, he thought Rikuo's angry look was hilarious, in fact.

"The Futtachi of Tonoo will throw fruits to scare people, you have to remember that. But you know, Rikuo, you're still one quarter youkai, how can you fail to avoid a rain of fruit?"

"Isn't that right?" Dohiko looked left and right, expecting his companions to voice their agreement. "That's right! What he said!" the other Futtachi said in response.

"You threw it suddenly, how am I supposed to avoid it!"

"Oh? Really? Your Fear can cause your body to disappear, why don't you just use that? Oh yeah, you can use Hatsu too, that technique where one can see but cannot touch. As long as you use that technique, you won't get hit by the fruit."

"Why would I need to emit Fear even when I'm washing the clothes!"

"Never disperse your Fear at any time."

Dohiko said with a serious face, but his face immediately reverted to his smiling self as he continued,

"Didn't Itaku-sensei scold you like that before? That can't do, you have to listen to your teacher."

Rikuo was furious at that moment, but did not retort at all. If he had time to argue with them, then he should go back to washing the clothes. In addition, just like Dohiko said, if he had not stopped emitting his Fear, he would be able to avoid the fruits. Even though he hated to admit it, but that was correct.

Because such a thing happened yesterday, Rikuo did not let down his guard at all as he brought the washed clothes to the sunning area, climbing between the rocks. If he felt something weird, he was ready to disappear at a moment's notice.

But no fruit attacks were done before he reached the sunning area. After hanging the clothes to dry, and Rikuo was climbing down the steep slope, Rikuo thought that maybe those guys didn't have as much free time as he thought to cause trouble for him every day. However, once Rikuo thought that, it meant that he had lost. Just then, a fruit hit the back of his head, and as Rikuo felt something was wrong and was about to turn around, the fruits started to fly towards him. And in the end, he had slipped and fell just like the day before.

Rikuo, whose back had hit the rocks on the riverbank, groaned. Dohiko, who jumped on the halfway point of the slope with one leap, shouted,

"Hey! Rikuo! Are you okay? Didn't I tell you that you definitely must not disperse your Fear?"

"You're noisy!"

The furious Rikuo grabbed one of the rocks and threw it at Dohiko, however he avoided it easily and stuck out his tongue.

"Wah! What do you think, I can dodge well, right? This is my Fear, just kidding! Ha ha ~~~"

Dohiko turned his backside to Rikuo, patted it twice, and disappeared into the forest. It made him extremely furious.

"That bastard..."

It may be because he was still angry, but Rikuo was not as focused compared to usual when cutting the wood, and there were many instances where the axe couldn't make a straight or clean cut.

Just as Rikuo was feeling frustrated at being unable to do his job well, a green being suddenly emerged from the river.

"Rikuo!"

"Wah!"

The voice was heard just as Rikuo raised his axe, and he fell backwards. Seeing Rikuo fall on his butt, the being couldn't help but point at him and laugh.

"Ha ha ha ha ha!"

The youkai, laughing while holding his stomach, was the swamp kappa Amezo. He climbed out from the river, and walked towards the bank.

"Amezo, it's you... don't scare me like that so suddenly."

Rikuo gave him a look while picking up his axe.

"Sorry. You did take a big fall though, are you alright?"

Rikuo pouted.

"...What, did you see?"

"Yeah, yesterday and just now. Dohiko is really bad. Does your back hurt?"

"A lot. If I had a shell like you, it might be a lot better."

"Ha ha ha! That's right! My shell is really hard and can withstand anything!"

Amezo thought that Rikuo was praising his shell, and started to happily show off. The wet and thick shell looked very sturdy and seemed to be able to deflect all attacks. However, that was not all to Amezo's shell, even his shoulders

and wrists had a shell covering, just like sports guards. Even though he is considered a kappa, he did not have a plate on his head, and looked totally different, like a lizard or a chameleon. It was hard to imagine from his appearance, but Amezo has a warm personality and always tries to start a conversation with Rikuo.

After scaring Rikuo, Amezo stayed where he was, lying on the ground to dry his shell. It looked like he wanted to continue talking to Rikuo, but Rikuo only continued to cut the wood in silence. His face still looked angry as well. So Amezo asked,

“Eh? Rikuo, are you angry?”

“No. I’m not.”

Rikuo did not turn around, and continued to swing the axe. The wood gave a dry crack and split into two.

“But your face looks really grumpy. Are you angry at Dohiko, or is it at me?”

“Forget it, it’s nothing... actually, it’s not exactly nothing.”

“What kind of answer is that?”

“I don’t understand either.”

He swung the axe. It hit the wood, but the wood did not split into two. Rikuo gave a ‘che’. Large amounts of perspiration appeared on his forehead.

“I’m anxious. I want to get stronger quickly, and go to Kyoto as soon as possible.”

“I see. But Rikuo, you won’t get stronger just by being anxious. Perseverance is needed in training.”

“I know that.”

“Do you like that Onmyoji beauty that much?”

“I don’t feel that way towards her. In addition, she’s not a beauty, just ordinary... you’re doing it again.”

“But you don’t have enough ability, it is suicide even if you go there. So you better stay in Tonoo and increase your abilities. If you become strong, that Onmyoji might fall in love with you.”

“You know...”

Rikuo stopped his work and sighed.

“I didn’t come here to train because I want to look good in front of the girls.”

“I know. But it’s more relaxing if you think of it that way. I think you’re too serious in everything you do.”

“Too serious...”

Is it really like that? Rikuo tilted his head and started to think. When Rikuo was in his human body, Zen had chided him in the same way as well.

---Does that mean I work too hard?

Rikuo thought as he swung his axe downwards. Just as the axe penetrated halfway through the log---

“Aiyah, that’s not good enough.”

Amezo’s voice was heard.

“Rikuo, you don’t know how to cut the logs at all. Didn’t Awashima teach you the trick?”

“Awashima? No.”

Rikuo shook his head.

In Tonoo, every youkai would be allocated a chore to teach the newcomer. The one who was supposed to teach Rikuo how to cut wood is the youkai Awashima, but on the first day, besides telling Rikuo the location of the axe, and where to put the cut logs, he didn’t say anything else.

“That’s all I have to teach you, there’s nothing else. That was what that guy said.”

“He’s like that, how troublesome. He’s serious when teaching battling skills, but when it comes to chores, he’s really slack about it.”

Amezo sighed and shook his head, and he suddenly hit his palm with his fist.

“Okay! Let me teach you the trick to cutting wood!”

“You’ll teach me?”

“Yeah. If you learnt the trick, the chore of cutting wood would be over in a flash.”

“Really? But I’ve actually got the trick to cutting wood. It’s to use the weight of the axe, right?”

Rikuo said as he raised the axe. But Amezo wagged his finger side to side, shaking his head.

“Rikuo, that is also one of the tricks. But as youkai, we can’t be satisfied with just that. If you’re a youkai, you have to learn to apply the usage of Fear in everyday tasks.”

“Using Fear... in cutting wood?”

“Those skills aren’t difficult at all. In short, it’s concentrating and raising efficiency. Rikuo, let me ask you, when you wish to defeat an enemy quickly, what would you do?”

“Let me see...”

Rikuo frowned. Amezo laughed...

“That is using a single finishing blow. Maintaining the emission of Fear, concentrate fully and deal a lethal blow to the opponent. Do you understand? If you want to finish it in one blow, you have to do it at full power. There aren’t so many chances on the battlefield that you can have a second chance at attacking. Even though you might not be able to defeat the enemy in one blow, but in the end, it’s focusing all your energy on the attack. The same principle applies to wood cutting. You keep failed consecutively because you’re distracted. You have to focus and swing the axe while imagining that you’re going to destroy the enemy.”

“Imagine that you’re going to destroy the enemy...”

“That’s right. Okay, let’s try it.”

Following Amezo’s instructions, Rikuo placed a log onto the platform. It was the log which was only cut halfway through.

He took a deep breath and picked up the axe. There was wind blowing through the forest, causing Rikuo’s hair to sway with the wind.

Then, Rikuo activated his Fear, and raised his axe high. He stared at the log while maintaining his Fear. He told himself, the thing in front of him was not a log, but an opponent he had to take down with all his might.

He needs to crush the opponent in one hit. Where should he attack, and how to create a fatal blow, focusing all his attention on finding the opponent's weak point...

Suddenly, his instinct caught on to something. At that moment---

---There!

Rikuo swung his axe downwards.

"Hah!"

Rikuo shouted subconsciously. The axe seemed to be automatically drawn into the log, and then, two cleanly cut blocks of wood appeared next to the platform. His hands were also left with the lingering feeling of excitement and satisfaction.

"Rikuo, you could do it if you put your heart to it! No, it should be that you learn really quickly!"

Amezo said excitedly.

"No, that could just be a stroke of good luck."

Rikuo replied humbly.

"Idiot! If it was just good luck, then you should practice until you're 100% successful!"

Rikuo thought it made sense, so he placed another log onto the platform.

It was just repeated practice after that. Rikuo tried to search for the feeling he achieved when he was successful while swinging the axe over and over again. Concentrating is the most important thing. After understanding that, the frequency in which he made bad cuts decreased.

"Thank you, Amezo. I seemed to be grasped the trick."

"Ha ha ha! You're welcome!"

Amezu puffed out his chest in happiness.

With the addition of a new skill, Rikuo spent a long while after that concentrating on the wood cutting.

Seeing that Rikuo could already use it so skillfully, and that the shadows on his face had disappeared, Amezo reorganized his feelings, and said with a warm tone,

"Hey, have you been to Kyoto?"

"No, how about you?"

"Me neither. Because I have never left this place before. Sigh, what kind of place is Kyoto?"

"Hmm, there should be a lot of temples."

Rikuo answered while swinging his axe skillfully.

"Also...that's right. I heard that it's surrounded by mountains, so it's very cold in winter and very hot in summer."

"It's surrounded by mountains, huh? That means that there would be Tengus in those mountains? I heard that amongst all the Tengus, the Tengus from Kyoto are the most powerful.

Amezo's happy face caused Rikuo's feelings to gradually become milder.

"It's so nice to be able to go to Kyoto, I envy you~~"

Amezo said while rolling on the grass by the riverbank, continuously saying "So nice~~"

"If so, then as long as you come with me, wouldn't it all be good?"

Hearing Rikuo's words, Amezo suddenly stopped what he was doing.

"Eh? M...me?"

Amezo's face was full of confusion. Even though his appearance is strange, he shows a wide range of emotions.

"That's right, come with me."

"But, I..."

Amezo stuttered and never finished his sentence. Rikuo said with a laugh.

"Heh heh, it's alright. I'm not forcing you. But you can treat it was going on a sightseeing trip to Kyoto, and conveniently defeating Hagoromo Gitsune in the meantime, isn't that cool?"

"... .."

At that moment, Amezo quieted down. Rikuo did not continue speaking and resuming his wood cutting.

As Rikuo was cutting wood, Amezo was either staring at the sky or spacing out while chewing on cucumbers, like he was thinking of something, but he still did not say anything.

After cutting all the wood he should be cutting, Rikuo placed the axe against the stump that acted as the platform, and fell backwards, his whole body lying on the ground. He was covered in sweat.

"It's so hot. I take a bath in the river before going to practice."

Just as Rikuo said it to the clear skies, Amezo's face suddenly appeared in front of him.

"Rikuo!"

"Wah! What!"

"If you want to bath, I know a good place."

"A good place?"

"Yeah, it's a secret spot I discovered, a special place. Even though we have to walk up a mountain path, but there's a waterfall there, it's cool and comfortable. I've told very few youkai in the village about that place."

Amezo did not wait for Rikuo's reply before taking his hand, and shouting "Come! Let's go!" For reasons unknown, Amezo was suddenly very enthusiastic.

"O...okay! I'm going! Don't pull me!"

Chapter 4

Rikuo's practice partner may not always be Itaku.

Awashima, Dohiko and Amezo may be Rikuo's opponent during practice. Changing opponents means that many types of battle tactics can be learnt, it is a good training method for Rikuo.

Rikuo and Amezo were currently fighting each other in the practice field formed by a tree stump. The rest of the youkai were watching some distance away.

Itaku was standing on a tree branch such that he is able to see the whole practice field. This tree branch is not a normal tree branch, the branch is so thick such that it could be considered a large tree.

Rikuo is currently using Hatsu, and dodging Amezo's water based attacks. Just as Itaku was observing their battle, Awashima came up to stand beside him.

"I heard that Amezo brought Rikuo to that waterfall."

Awashima, *who has the body of a man*, said with a toothpick in his mouth. Awashima is an Amanojaku, male in the day, and female at night, a youkai with two genders.

"Brought Rikuo to the waterfall?"

Itaku turned and asked Awashima. Awashima continued to watch the practice field, and nodded.

"Amezo would only bring people he admires to the waterfall. Even though I'm not sure what that guy Rikuo did, but Amezo seems to like him."

"... .."

Rikuo should not be intentionally did anything to win favours, Itaku thought. That guy would always enter people's homes undetected. Maybe he quietly opened the door from outside...no, most likely, it was Amezo who opened the door. He brought Rikuo to the waterfall on his own accord, that was the biggest piece of evidence.

Amezo's favourite waterfall was sheltered by a patch of forest and is hard to find under normal circumstances, even for the youkai in Tonoo, very few of them were invited by Amezo to that place. Itaku had went there with Amezo once, the waterfall there was especially clean and the small amount of spiritual energy made it a comfortable place.

However, even though Amezo had a light hearted personality, he was very strict when judging if a person should be brought to the waterfall. Uninteresting people who definitely not be invited. In the past, there were youkai from the village who wanted to force Amezo to tell them the location, and angered him, almost causing him to attack the other party. To Amezo, the waterfall was that special of a place to him.

Currently, the practice session was taking a half time break. Rikuo was about to force Amezo into a tight spot when Dohiko, who appointed himself as the referee, suddenly jumped out and called for a break, forcing an end to the mock battle.

Dohiko seemed to have cracked a joke, and Rikuo said a sentence or two in reply. At that moment, his surroundings were filled with laughter.

The scene which Itaku saw that morning resurfaced in his mind once more.

In the morning, Rikuo carried the washed clothes and climbed up the mountain, but he met Dohiko and his companions who were throwing large amount of fruits at him. At that time, Itaku was also watching everything from the flat rock.

Itaku knew that he was the third hashing. Yesterday and the day before that, Rikuo, who was hit by the fruit, ended up falling to the bottom of the slope.

However, it was different today. The fruits passed through Rikuo's body and fell to the ground. Rikuo used "Kyoka Shigetsu" to avoid the attack.

Dohiko didn't give up, and threw more fruit towards Rikuo, who was standing somewhere else, but that attack was still avoided by Rikuo's Hatsu, that was not all though. Rikuo not only dodged the attack, and used his stick to hit the fruit back. The fruit flew back and hit Dohiko's forehead, and he could not process what had happened for a moment, but he regained his senses quickly and burst out laughing.

"Rikuo, that's awesome!"

"I can't be falling on my butt every day."

Rikuo said while grinning. Dohiko and the other youkai cheered. "Rikuo is really amazing, as expected!" "The kid has some ability!" and the Futtachi continued to cheer.

---Dohiko was *conquered* too, huh... ...

Itaku thought as he watched Dohiko, who was chatting and laughing with Rikuo on the practice field.

It was not something that occurred suddenly in a dramatic manner, but a small change in emotional state.

Amezo and Dohiko never distanced themselves that much from Rikuo, and it was the same for Itaku and Awashima. Ever since the day Rikuo was brought to Tonoo, the youkai have treated Rikuo normally, and acted as his sparring partners. And since the first day, they have also joked occasionally with him.

But in reality, all the youkai knew in their hearts that Rikuo was just a guest, and he would leave here one day, and go to a place where he wouldn't have any ties with them. The Itaku now harbored that mentality.

A passing guest who would leave one day and a comrade who would walk the same road with him in the future were two different things relationship wise.

Amezo and Dohiko have already seen Rikuo as a comrade, which is why he was brought to a waterfall, or cheer even if they had been hit in the forehead by a fruit.

However, Itaku did not have that mindset.

---I'm different from them. I won't open the door and let you into my world.....

"That guy Rikuo is such a strange person."

Once Awashima opened his mouth, the tip of the toothpick started to move. He continued with his head tilted slightly to the side,

"In terms of ability, Rikuo is obviously still weak. But for some unknown reason, you can't stop taking notice of him."

Itaku stared at the side of Awashima's face. After a while, Awashima finally noticed Itaku's stare and turned his head towards Itaku.

"W...why are you giving me that look?"

"Nothing."

Itaku only said that single word. Awashima hurriedly added to his opinion,

"Hey hey, let me explain, I don't plan to be good friends with Rikuo, okay. And that guy was grinning stupidly during practice, and was not serious at all. He must be scolded properly."

His tone was filled with denial, like he wanted to salvage something.

“Then you can do it.”

“Ah?”

Awashima turned his head towards Itaku.

“I was referring to scolding him. Go find that guy who needs to have some sense beaten into him later, and give him a good scolding.”

After saying that, Itaku nodded while looking at Awashima straight in the eyes.

Chapter 5

At the back of the mansion where Akagappa lives, there was a big open air bath cut out from stone.

Awashima erased his youki, and peeked out from the shadows of the rock. He saw Rikuo squatting some six feet away. He was bare chested, and only wore a pair of work pants, and was using a brush to clean the stone bath. This was Rikuo’s job after the daytime practice session.

Okay, time to make a move. Awashima nodded and threw the brush in his right hand towards Rikuo’s back. Because the target wasn’t a small one, the brush hit Rikuo’s back. However, the scene in front of him was just an illusion.

The illusion faded into the air. Then, the actual Rikuo appeared some distance away from the illusion.

“Awashima, what are you doing?”

Rikuo smiled, holding the brush.

“Hey, you’re really good at dodging.”

Awashima left the shadows of the rock, and replied with a smile. Internally though, he was sticking out his tongue.

If the brush hit its target, he would be able to use “Too lax! Didn’t we tell you to maintain your Fear at all times!” as a reason to start chiding Rikuo, but he dodged it this time and now Awashima didn’t have any reason to start scolding him.

No, that’s not right. In fact, whether he is really here to scold Rikuo was something to be questioned.

Earlier in the day, he had told Itaku that he wanted to scold Rikuo and that guy actually pushed the task onto him, and he came here without thinking too much about it. However, thinking about it, he didn’t want to lecture Rikuo at all.

Even though Rikuo had been joking with Amezo and Dohiko in the practice fields during the day, but it wasn’t something so serious that he needed to be scolded. As long as Rikuo could improve on his fighting skills, it was enough. As one of Rikuo’s mock battle partners, Awashima knew very clearly that Rikuo was improving and becoming stronger every day.

“Is there anything you need?”

Having been asked that by Rikuo, Awashima raised his head. Seeing that Awashima didn’t say anything, Rikuo gave him a look of suspicion.

How troubling. He originally came here to lecture Rikuo, but not only has he lost his excuse to start the scolding, he had also lost his fighting spirit. But he couldn’t just say bye-bye and leave, it was too unnatural. If it turned out that way, Rikuo would definitely think that he only came here to throw a brush at him and laugh.

“Uh...ugh...I...”

Just as Awashima was shuttering and thinking of something to say, Rikuo picked up the brush at his feet , and threw it towards Awashima. Awashima caught the brush subconsciously. Then Rikuo said,

“If you have nothing to do, then help me wash the bath.”

“Bas...bastard! Why do I have to help a newcomer like you with the chores! If Awashima wanted to scold Rikuo, he would definitely say this, but in this situation, he couldn’t do it at all.

“Ohh, okay.”

He answered. Just like that, Awashima had no choice but to help clean the bath.

Awashima took off his short coat, leaving only his cotton shirt on, picked up the brush, and squatted in the middle of the stone bath. The sun was beginning to move towards the west, but it was still a long time to evening. Therefore, Awashima will remain in his male body for a while longer.

He finally had an excuse to stay. But wasn’t the process for achieving that kind of strange?

Because the bath was rather spacious, cleaning it while keeping close to one another will decrease the efficiency. So in the end, the both of them decided to clean their respective sections of the bath with their backs to each other. What followed was silence, and the cleaning continued. The only sounds coming from the bath were the sounds of scrubbing brushes and stones rubbing against one another. This silence made Awashima very uncomfortable.

---What is this strange feeling...

Awashima bit down on his toothpick, thinking to himself. Suddenly being so conscious of a person he would normally not care that much about, Awashima felt comfortable all over. He carried out the task he didn’t want to do, cleaning the bath, while thinking about what he should do to break the silence. In the end, he decided to voice what he randomly thought of...

“Rikuo, your hair is really long.”

After saying that, Awashima regretted it immediately.

---What the hell am I saying...!

It was another hard to understand and unimportant topic.

However, he couldn’t take back what he said. Then again, Rikuo didn’t think too much about it, and replied immediately,

“That’s right, I’m a youkai now, which is why my hair is long. It’ll become shorter when I change into my human form.”

“I see.”

Awashima replied nonchalantly, then he suddenly remembered something,

“That’s right, I heard that originally, you would change into a human during the day?”

“That’s correct. It’s like that outside, but it’s special here, so I look like this during the day and night.”

Someone has said before, there are very little places in Tonoo where the sun shines on, and the air is filled with youki, so Rikuo is able to maintain his youkai appearance during the day and night.

“Isn’t that inconvenient in the outside world? Being human for some time, then becoming a youkai the next...”

Awashima really wanted to talk to Rikuo about this topic.

“It’s inconvenient...”

Rikuo said softly, and continued after thinking for a while,

“I don’t know how to express it either. This feeling is different from being inconvenienced, but I felt confused and uncertain over this before.”

Rikuo said, there was a time when he was very doubtful about whether he should inherit the Nura Gumi. The co-existence of human and youkai affected the matter of inheritance greatly. Whether a human with only one quarter youkai blood would be able to become the heir to a youkai Yakuza organization caused Rikuo a lot of frustration, and feelings of suspicion amongst the older youkai Generals. But some things happened, and with the help of his comrades, Rikuo can finally accept himself.

“How about Awashima? How do you feel?”

Rikuo asked in return. Awashima had already expected that he would be asked this. Awashima, with a special body that switches between genders, was just like Rikuo, who had always switched between his human and youkai self, so Rikuo was naturally curious about Awashima’s experiences.

“I have also gone through a lot of things before.”

The child between a goddess and demon god is a youkai whose gender will change depending on the time of the day. Having a male and female soul in the same body caused Awashima a lot of trouble and frustration. A young Awashima did not know what Hatsu was and did not know what was considered a Hatsu, and was only deeply troubled by the meaning of his own existence. Awashima’s childhood was passed possessing such doubts.

As time passed, the male and female in his body grew up. The boy became a man; the girl became a woman, and his body went through obvious changes. During this process, Awashima learnt how to use his Hatsu. After going the hard training of the forgiveness of the goddess and the fighting abilities of the demon god, these two co-existing opposite techniques, Awashima finally completed the techniques he needed to learn as a ninja youkai, and was temporarily free of the thoughts that tormented him as he was growing up.

However, even though he had learnt how to fight, Awashima had been discriminated against many times before.

Besides his original group, the Tonoo family was also in charge of recommending and allocating mercenaries around the country. The members of the various clans will visit Tonoo when they need mercenaries, and will borrow strong Tonoo youkai for a certain period of time. It was mostly during this time that Awashima gets humiliated.

---Will turn into a woman at night? Please, youkai normally fight at night, turning into a woman halfway during a fight, how do you expect us to fight on? Isn’t there other stronger youkai?

These types of comments have been said many times. Even if Awashima doesn’t dwell on these individual comments anymore, if the other party is overly nasty, Awashima would still lose his temper. Awashima had lost her temper as a woman many times before and had caused a lot of pain to the other party with even using her Fear.

“There are many simple minded people in the world, they’re everywhere. They conclude that I am useless without even understanding my power, total bastards.”

Remembering the humiliation that he had gone through, Awashima couldn’t help but click his tongue.

After hearing Awashima’s story, Rikuo nodded with a calm expression on his face. He said after a while,

“So you had that kind of past. Thank you for telling me these things.”

Even though it was a rather bland reaction, but the feeling wasn't that bad. Awashima did not need too much pity or sympathy.

“Uh, it's okay, I guess. Being able to hear your story, I should be thanking you as well.”

Even though Awashima is a little embarrassed, he still replied. The uncomfortable feeling that he had before had dissipated completely.

After that, both of them returned to their cleaning. After another long period of silence, Rikuo suddenly said,

“Oh yeah, Amezo taught me the secret to cutting wood.”

“Amezo taught you the secret skill?”

“Yeah, that is to apply the usage of Fear onto the cutting of wood.”

“I see.”

Even though his tone is calm, but Awashima can't help but click his tongue. What is that Amezo thinking, wood cutting is the area I'm in charge of. His own student was snatched away, and Awashima felt frustrated at that. But it had never crossed his mind that this was the result of him not teaching Rikuo properly.

“Okay then, since it's such a rare chance, let me teach you the secret to cleaning a bath.”

Calling it revenge is rather exaggerated, made even more so by the fact that only Awashima thought of it that way, but he still decided to play a small prank.

Rikuo accepted Awashima's good will.

“Really? Then please!”

“Okay, then move the brush following my instructions.”

After saying that, Awashima stood next to Rikuo.

“Listen, you have to imagine that you're drawing a circle. Move your arms in a circular motion.”

“Like this?”

Rikuo said as he started to draw circles with his brush.

“No, not like that, bigger.”

“Li...like this?”

“Just like that. Then make it bigger, and repeat!”

“Oh! Ohh!”

Rikuo's right hand started to make very big movements. After a while, a heavily panting Rikuo asked,

“Ca...can I ask...this action, what does it have to do with the activation of Fear?”

“This action huh...”

After pausing for a while, Awashima finally said,

“It will make your arm very tired, and it’s good for muscle training!”

“Hey, that has nothing to do with Fear at all!”

Not only did he not get offended by the rebuke, Awashima actually started laughing, holding his stomach.

“Rikuo, I didn’t expect that you’ll be so good at playing the straight man, that’s kind of amazing.”

“Now isn’t the time for praises...”

Rikuo glared at Awashima, but started laughing not long after.

After cleaning the bath, the sky and Awashima started showing signs of entering their night states. Awashima had never showed anyone the moment he changes into a girl. And he doesn’t plan to do so from now on.

“Rikuo, thanks. This was good exercise.”

“If that’s so, then come and help me tomorrow as well.”

“Don’t be stupid. I dare you to try asking me to help you again.”

Awashima threw the brush to Rikuo, and left the bath after saying, “I’m going.” Even though cleaning the bath is a tiring task, but his body felt very light.

It was now night in Tonoo. Rikuo’s bed is a pot that they simply put on the ground.

Rikuo was very angry at the beginning, and felt it wasn’t a place for people to sleep. But after the second day, as Rikuo prepared to sleep, hugging his knees, his eyelids grew heavy immediately.

After working hard for the whole day, that sort of reaction is normal. The continuous apprentice tasks and fighting practices sapped all of Rikuo’s mental and physical strength.

But feelings of satisfaction were also felt with the tiredness. I’ve become stronger compared to yesterday. These thoughts will always help Rikuo in getting a good rest.

After the night practice, Rikuo, who had finished his bath, quickly crawled into the pot. Awashima may have helped him clean the bath that evening on a whim, but Rikuo was still grateful. Just as he was about to fall asleep with these feelings of gratitude---

“Cough! Cough!...”

A series of coughs were heard. Hearing this sound, Rikuo knew who it was immediately.

Rikuo opened his eyes, and saw the Zashiki Warashi, Yukari’s face at the edge of the pot. She was wearing a yukata, a very small girl.

“Yukari, is there something wrong?”

Yukari was usually with the Yuki onna Reira, and normally she wouldn’t be Rikuo’s sparring partner. However, since she often came to the practice fields, the both of them had many opportunities to talk to one another. Even though she looked innocent, the way she spoke was clear and organized.

“What’s wrong? It’s already this late.”

“Nothing. I heard that you sleep in a pot, so I just came to see what it was like.”

After saying that, Yukari started to cough.

“You’ve seen it now, so you can go now. Yawn...you should go to sleep soon...I’m very sleepy now...”

Rikuo said as he yawned. His eyelids were about to slide shut.

“Don’t be so heartless. I am a Zashiki Warashi, you will gain fortune if you’re with me.”

“That’s right...Zashiki Warashi’s fear can bring fortune to others...”

“Rikuo, you’re already half asleep.”

Yukari said while giggling. Her shallow laughter only made him sleepier.

Before he went to sleep completely, Rikuo stretched out his arm, and patted Yukari lightly.

His fingertips felt the soft hair. And he seemed to hear someone telling him good night in his ear.

Chapter 6

Today, Itaku was not on the branch, but at the practice arena observing Rikuo’s mock battle.

Rikuo’s current practice partner is Dohiko. Even though Dohiko has a large build, as he is a ape-based youkai, he is very nimble. He jumped around, quickly dodging Rikuo’s attacks, as if he was mocking Rikuo and making him more frustrated. Amezo was at the side, shouting for Rikuo to calm down.

As for Awashima, he wasn’t around. It seemed that something else had cropped up in the mansion, and he had just left the practice arena.

After Amezo and Dohiko, Awashima was *conquered* as well. The practice last night confirmed this.

Rikuo is now seen as a comrade instead of a guest. Even though it wasn’t a big change, it still happened. The look in their eyes, their distance and the way they speak, were slowly changing into the way they treat a comrade. The biggest difference is in the way Awashima felt Rikuo’s “Fear”. It was the same for Amezo and Dohiko. From their interactions with Rikuo, they have started to feel his “Fear”.

Regarding Awashima being conquered, Itaku was also an accomplice. During the day training yesterday, the reason why Itaku asked Awashima to lecture Rikuo was partly because he wanted to test if he would really *submit to Rikuo*.

In the end, Awashima really got *conquered*. Itaku did not know what happened between the two of them, but he was sure about is, something must have happened for Awashima to feel “Fear” towards Rikuo.

---I haven’t been conquered yet.

Itaku harboured this strong feeling in his heart. I don’t feel any “Fear” towards you. You haven’t caused me to open my doors.

To Itaku, strongly rejecting Rikuo was also a way to rebel against Amezo and the rest, who have already been “conquered”. The rest of you have fallen into other people’s traps so easily, and have no pride at all---these are Itaku’s true thoughts.

Is it okay to treat him as a comrade this quickly? What is so charismatic about that guy?

“Your face looks really scary.”

Reira said as she stood beside Itaku. Yukari was with her.

Seeing that Itaku hasn’t said anything, Reira said again,

“First it’s Amezo and Dohiko, after that is Awashima. Seeing everyone slowly getting attracted to Rikuo, does that make you that unhappy?”

“This isn’t a matter of being happy or unhappy, I just find it strange. Is he that amazing? Does he really have that much ability to make everyone see him as a comrade in just a few days?”

Seeing Itaku tilting his head, Reira laughed softly.

“Having those feelings, doesn’t that prove that you’re attracted to him as well? If you’re not interested in him, you shouldn’t be feeling this way.”

Hearing this, Itaku felt this strong urge to say that the reason she gave was too preposterous, but he said nothing in the end. More denial will only result in more misunderstandings, it’s better not to say anything,

“Yukari is the same, she seems to like Rikuo a lot.”

Reira continued to say. Yukari, upon being named, snuggled closer to Reira and gave a meaningful smile.

“Rikuo is really a mysterious youkai. He’s only been here a week and has already captured the hearts of all the youkai.”

“Reira, even you?”

“What about me?”

“Did you feel his Fear as well?”

Reira only smiled, and she paused, intentionally increasing the suspense.

“He said a single sentence to me once.”

“What did he say?”

“Rikuo hoped that I would teach the method of making my handmade honey lemons to the yuki onna in his family.”

Itaku’s eyes narrowed as he observed Reira’s face. Her normally mature expression showed a rare expression, just like a young girl.

---I see. That means, I’m the only one who hasn’t been conquered yet...

Itaku lowered his head and smiled. Thinking back, he realized that Rikuo had made all the other youkai submit to him.

Is he too stubborn? Itaku couldn’t help but think of that. Someone can become really withdrawn and stubborn after staying in Tonoo for a long time.

But, Amezo and the rest were like him, having stayed in Tonoo all this while. Despite that, they surrendered to Rikuo so quickly? Could it be that the other youkai discovered something special in Rikuo, and he has not?

---Then show me.

Itaku thought. He raised his head, and looked towards Rikuo on the practice arena.

Rikuo and Dohiko’s mock battle just happened to end at that point.

“Reira.”

Itaku stared at the practice arena and said,

"I only believe in what I see on the battlefield. It's only through battle would I be able to interact with him."

Reira nodded.

"Okay, why not."

Itaku reached towards his back and pulled out a sickle.

"Reira, please prepare some honey lemons. When people are tired, honey lemons are the most effective."

After saying that, Itaku shouted towards Rikuo, who was standing in the middle of the practice arena.

"Rikuo!"

Rikuo, who was wiping off his sweat, turned and faced Itaku.

"I'm up next!"

"Ohh! Sure!"

Immediately after that sentence was said, Itaku closed in on Rikuo quickly, and swung his sickle out with all his might. Rikuo dodged as he whined,

"Hey! That's too sudden!"

"If the opponent is a Kyoto youkai, do you plan to say that too!"

Itaku said as he pulled out another sickle with his left hand, trapping Rikuo on both sides, and cutting him into half. However, it was just an illusion caused by "Kyoka Suigetsu".

--- Go with the grandson of Nurarihyon to Kyoto and fight together. Aren't you thinking about this now?

Just then, the voice of Akagappa from a few days back surfaced in his mind.

Itaku tsked and turned around quickly. After determining Rikuo's position, he closed in once more. A fierce battle resulted between the sickle and stick, equally matched.

---I will follow this guy?

---He will become my leader?

Itaku swung his sickles around like in a dance, while these questions swam around in his mind. The more he thought about it, the more unreal it felt.

The Tonoo youkai are a mercenary group. As long as someone needed him and established a contract, he would need to move with that leader. The relationship between the two of them was straightforward, without the weight that came with exchanging Sakazuki.

But, there were Tonoo youkai who suffered a lot because they ended up following an incapable leader.

---Rikuo, I'm different from the other youkai. *I will definitely not allow you to open my doors!*

Itaku quickly reached behind him with his right hand and switched his metal handled sickle for one with a bamboo handle. The bamboo came from the bamboo forests of Tonoo. The bamboo handle conformed to the shape of the palm, and was comfortable to grip. Itaku's feelings now made it easy for him to choose this sickle.

---I won't let you die in Kyoto. If you are going to die, then die on the practice arena of Tonoo!

“Wind sickle!”

Death is certain if it is not avoided. The sharp wind hit Rikuo’s body.

But, the body which was cut diagonally was only an illusion. The image warped, and disappeared into the air.

“Tsk!”

Even though he sounded really frustrated, his face wore a smile.

---“Kyoka Suigetsu” ...is really something.

At that moment, Itaku felt an aura, so he turned around.

Rikuo was standing there with his stick raised. Swinging the sickle in his left hand, Itaku prepared to block the stick that was about to swing towards him. But the Rikuo in his attacking position had already become an illusion, and Itaku, with his sickle in his left hand to block the attack, hit nothing but air. I see, the illusions aren’t just for dodging attacks, it was also a way to fool the enemy into thinking that they’re being attacked. After the illusion disappears, Rikuo will have closed in from another direction. The Hatsu on him had been maintained the whole time.

“That’s right! Maintaining the Hatsu...the state should never be released during battle!”

Itaku said. Then, Rikuo replied with his actions, attacking with his stick. Itaku blocked with two sickles.

---This guy’s Fear is interesting...

Itaku immersed himself in that feeling as he fought. The “Kyoka Suigetsu” that Rikuo used can attack and defend, and if used wisely in battle, it could be an effective technique.

---It can be used more effectively than I imagined...

Just as Itaku was analysing Rikuo’s fighting ability---

“Bad news! Rikuo!”

A pale faced Awashima rushed into the practice arena. Awashima, who had just returned from the mansion, brought with him very bad news.

“The Tonoo youkai who went to Kyoto have bad news...the Onmyoji have been slaughtered! Kyoto...is going to fall into the hands of Hagoromo Gitsune!”

Chapter 7

Now, the situation has changed greatly.

After Awashima reported the situation in Kyoto, Rikuo decided to leave Tonoo that night. He knows that his Hatsu is incomplete, and he needed to stay and improve, but the situation had turned urgent, he needs to go help his friend.

Just as Rikuo gave his thanks to Akagappa, the leader of Tonoo, and was leaving---

---Does anyone dare to follow me to Kyoto?

He tried to instigate. But not one youkai expressed their wish to go with Rikuo to Kyoto. At the moment, none of the youkai dared to speak up.

“I’m begging you! The Kyoto youkai seem to be strong, I need your fighting power! It’ll be even better if you can join my Parade of Hundred Demons!”

Rikuo's pleading voice could be heard clearly from the boundary of Tonoo.

Awashima and the other youkai who heard Rikuo's plea looked at each other then, like they did not know what to do, and started to discuss amongst themselves.

---This doesn't need discussion at all.

Itaku stood on the branch, clicking his tongue as he listened to their discussion. Rikuo and the rest did not know that he was nearby. From where Itaku was standing, he could clearly see Rikuo's unguarded back.

---All of you have already decided to follow Rikuo, do you still need to discuss this?

Awashima, Amezo, Dohiko, Reira and Yukari have all felt Rikuo's "Fear". They were only discussing to hide their own embarrassment.

Rikuo seemed to understand what they were thinking, because he opened his mouth and said,

"Hey! So what would it be! Prepare quickly, we're going!"

That tone of voice was as if he was going to slap them on their bottoms to tell them to hurry up.

---All of them want to follow Rikuo to Kyoto. Then what about me...?

It was time to make a decision. But Itaku was still hesitant, and had not made a move to jump down from the branch.

---Then again, does Rikuo need me?

Compared to his own feelings, the feelings of the other party was more important. Just as Itaku was thinking about that question, Rikuo's voice was heard from the ground level.

"Itaku didn't come?"

Rikuo said softly, almost mumbling.

With that short sentence, Rikuo shifted his line of sight back to Rikuo once more. He saw the silhouette that has always bothered him, defenceless.

Itaku's blood started to boil. A state of near rage possessed Itaku. When he came to his senses, he found that he was already standing behind Rikuo, with his sickle around Rikuo's neck.

"Aren't I always telling you never to disperse your Fear?"

"Itaku..."

Rikuo stayed in his current stance, saying softly.

Itaku moved the sickle, as if he was threatening to slit Rikuo's throat, and said,

"As of now, you have died 200 times in Tonoo. You aren't on your guard at all, it's dangerous like that, don't you know!"

Itaku let go of his sickle after speaking, and put it back on his back. Then he threw a harsh statement towards Rikuo,

"Your training isn't over, I'm going to continue being your instructor! However...I won't exchange Sakazuki with you!"

"...Thanks!"

The moment Rikuo smiled, Itaku couldn't help but jolt.

The heart felt like it was being squeezed. But the mysterious thing was that it didn't feel uncomfortable at all.

---Did I...open my doors as well?

That thought suddenly flashed through Itaku's mind.

No, not yet. Denying it continuously like that, he was really very stubborn. But it doesn't matter, it's no use thinking about this now, there was no need to rush it.

Go to Kyoto with Rikuo, and flight alongside him. At that time, he will find his answer.

---Whether I Fear Rikuo or not, I'll find the answer on the battlefield!

Rikuo pulled out the stick from his waist, and adopted a battle stance. This stick is the stick which he used in the practice arena, and was the tree branch from a spiritual tree Takimaru. Rikuo turned to the Fear surrounding Tonoo, and raised the stick.

"Let's go! Farewell, Tonoo!"

Takimaru swung downwards with an awe-inspiring sound, and cut through Tonoo's Fear.

~Fin~

Story 3: The Story of Kyoto's Youkai

Chapter 1

---Sigh, this is troublesome.

Keikain Ryuuji thought to himself as he glanced at his partner walking next to him.

Rather than calling it a 'glance', it would be more accurate to call it a 'stare'. His partner is really tall, and had handsome features and could be termed a 'Bishounen'; but he had a quiet nature and this made it difficult for others to tell what he was thinking.

Like Ryuuji, he was wearing a black wind resistant cloak. Inside, he wore a western suit and a pair of high boots. He was also wearing arm guards and compared to Ryuuji, who was wearing wooden Geta, he was dressed quite conservatively.

Keikain Mamiru---that is the name of Ryuuji's partner.

At night, the two of them are currently patrolling Kyoto's suburbs. Normally, Ryuuji would not bring someone along when he is patrolling, and always does it alone. This is the first time he brought Mamiru out for patrols.

The one who wanted Ryuuji to bring Mamiru out, was the Head of the Keikain main house, Hidemoto the 27th, also Ryuuji's grandfather.

This happened in the day. Hidemoto called Ryuuji, and sat down in his room, face to face with Ryuuji.

"Ryuuji, do you know of Mamiru from the branch family?"

Hidemoto asked.

"Yes, I know him. But we haven't met recently. Is he doing well?"

"Yes, he is fine. Mamiru's training is starting to bear fruit, he is almost ready to do his duties on his own now."

"Oh? *Training*, is it? I wonder what kind of training it is."

Ryuuji's tone was sarcastic. But Hidemoto ignored it, like he didn't wish to discuss *that incident* with his grandson, and went straight to the main point.

"Ryuuji, can you take him along when you patrol?"

Hidemoto said.

"Bring Mamiru along? Why?"

His Onmyoji abilities are already very strong, he's just lacking in actual practical experience. Letting him go on patrols, and letting him fight youkai is the fastest way for him to gain experience. So, I want you to bring him along when you make your rounds."

"I see. Letting him go on patrols with me, so that I can watch him while he fights his first battles? But, why me? Mamiru is from the branch family, shouldn't you be asking someone from the branch family who is less busy?"

“The main duty of the branch families is to protect the seals, and they are already very busy with that. In addition, that person needs to be an expert. Mamiru is talented, and we can’t let him die on the battlefield due to inexperience. So an experienced person is needed to help. In the main house, you are the most suitable for this.”

“It’s an honour.”

Ryuuji hmphed.

“I will try my best to protect the talents in the Keikain family.”

He mockingly added another sentence.

“Let me remind you, your job isn’t just to protect Mamiru. You have to guide him during battle as well. Cultivating Mamiru into a first rate Onmyoji will greatly affect the future of the Keikain family, understand?”

Hidemoto stand as he nodded with force.

Even if it’s just one more person, it is important to do their best in cultivating capable Onmyoji. Basically, regardless of the era, the Keikain family always proceeded with that goal. In addition, for the 27th Head, cultivating talents has become an urgent task, and the most important topic.

There was only one reason for that. The “spiral seal” placed on Kyoto by the Hidemoto the 13th around 400 years ago had begun to lose its effectiveness.

The points of the spiral seal are located in temples or pools, and there are eight locations altogether. These eight locations form a spiral rune, and served to prevent youkai from invading. With this barrier, Kyoto was prevented from falling into youkai hands and 400 years of peace was maintained.

However, there is no barrier in the world that would last forever. It is most effective the moment it is erected, after that it will worsen bit by bit. It’s just like the aging of the human body.

Based on this, the spiral seal that was able to seal youkai for 400 years had an exceptionally long life. From this, it can be concluded that the spiritual ability of the Onmyoji who erected the seal, the 13th Head Hidemoto, was especially strong.

However, no matter how amazing he is, he cannot stop the reality that the life expectancy of the seal is going to end soon. The youkai forces will take the weakening seals as a chance to invade Kyoto. Therefore, they would have to weaken the youkai forces once more. The Keikain family now need that kind of power even more than any other generation.

“Okay, let me meet Mamiru.”

Ryuuji said.

Regarding Mamiru’s talents, Ryuuji had heard of it a long time ago. In terms of talent, Ryuuji’s younger sister Yura was also said to be very talented, and was regarded very highly as one of the candidates to be the next Head of the family. And Mamiru was even better, endorsed by the elders of the main and branch families.

Ryuuji and Mamiru were childhood playmates, and with Yura, the three of them played together often. But after they grew up, the two of them met less often and even if they met now, they didn’t talk much.

“For him, he should be training by himself in the backyard.

Hidemoto said.

Therefore, Ryuuji went to the backyard to meet with Mamiru, whom he had not seen in a long time.

The Mamiru standing there was very different from the Mamiru that Ryuuji remembered, like he had become another person.

He had grown taller, but that was not important.

“Mamiru, it’s been a long time.”

“Yes.”

“Have you been well lately?”

“Yes.”

“We’re going on patrol together tonight.”

“Must destroy...youkai.”

“That’s right. If we meet any youkai, we’ll have to kill them on the spot.”

“Youkai...are all evil.”

His face was void of expression, and had a flat tone when speaking. Answering in broken sentences, he was just like a robot.

Even though he still had Mamiru’s appearance, he had become another person inside. Ryuuji had that feeling.

The current Mamiru had obviously lost his soul. His memories of playing together with Ryuuji had probably disappeared.

---Is this the result of the forbidden technique...

Ryuuji thought darkly to himself. Even though he had heard of Mamiru’s situation before, witnessing it firsthand left a bitter taste in his mouth. However, Ryuuji was no longer a child, and he won’t continue feeling sad.

Protecting Kyoto isn’t just about lip service. Ryuuji knew that very well, and he needed to take on that responsibility.

After saying to Mamiru, “I’m going to pick you up tonight”, Ryuuji left the backyard.

“Humans are scary as well, they can’t be underestimated...”

Ryuuji mumbled to himself as he walked.

Chapter 2

Currently, Mamiru walked behind Ryuuji quietly. His face was expressionless, and it was hard to tell if he was feeling nervous or not.

“Ryuuji, will they appear?”

Mamiru suddenly said. A sentence without any context at all made one want to teach him how to carry out a conversation, and not battle techniques.

“What will appear? Youkai?”

“Yes.”

“Of course they’ll appear.”

Ryuuji answered.

The purpose of this trip was to build up Mamiru's actual battle experience. Therefore, Ryuuji picked a location where youkai might appear.

This location is the outer boundary of the spiral seal.

The both of them are 3 kilometres south of Kyoto station. One kilometre north east of their current location would be one of the eight seals---Fushime Inari Shrine. This means, they are now outside the seal.

Even though the spiral seal had weakened, but up till now, there wasn't any need to exterminate any youkai inside the seal.

But, it was different outside the seal. Strong youkai have already started to move around there.

Therefore, when patrolling, Ryuuji would normally focus on the outside boundaries of the seal. Strong youkai would appear there occasionally, and vigilance is needed.

Even though there are located near a residential area, there are virtually no street lamps. When the two of them arrived in front of a dimly lit park, Ryuuji suddenly stopped walking.

An irritating wind blew past. It's coming, Ryuuji thought. There are always warning signs when youkai are about to appear, that was what the wind felt like.

"Mamiru, the youkai is going to appear. Prepare yourself."

"Okay."

Just as the two of them were talking, a corner of the park suddenly exploded.

The location of the explosion is the sand pit. A large crustacean suddenly appeared from the sand, and another look showed that it was a crab of some sort. However, upon closer inspection, the number of crab legs were too numerous and it even had a long bug like tail. It also had a mouth in the middle of its shell, and it was emitting strange breathing sounds.

---This species of youkai, I have never seen it before.

Ryuuji raised an eyebrow.

Even though he was young, Ryuuji was already part of the elite in the Keikain family, and an expert in exterminating youkai, so he had seen many youkai before. But, he had never seen the youkai that appeared this night. It looks like a new species of youkai.

This *large crab*, walked towards them with the sound of shuffling.

---Come, let me see your abilities.

Turning around, he saw that Mamiru had already prepared a stack of talismans.

"Mamiru, this is one on one. Go."

"Okay."

Ryuuji backed up a few steps, and Mamiru took one step forward.

The next second, the two pincers of the large crab stabbed towards Mamiru. Mamiru dodged the attack quickly, and threw the talismans into the air. The talismans formed a circle and surrounded the large crab.

"Perish!"

Mamiru shouted, the talismans surrounding the large crab shot out a powerful lightning attack. During that instant there was a deafening clap of lightning and the surroundings turned white, and it darkened once more.

The large crab was charred, and breathed no more.

---It was destroyed in an instant...

Ryuuji drew in a sharp breath.

He knew that Mamiru used an offensive Shikigami, but he didn't know that it possessed such destructive power. It didn't look like a human using techniques and was more of a weapons display...

---The Keikain family actually made such a monster...

Ryuuji shook his head as he walked towards Mamiru.

Mamiru was panting slightly. Using an offensive Shikigami required an instantaneous concentration of their spiritual power. Or it may be because his emotions were running high and affected his breathing. But as long as they grasped the main concept, they would be able to summon Shikigami without affecting their breathing.

"For your first time, you've done very well. You have to be calmer next time, and don't let your Shikigami mess up your breathing."

Ryuuji said as he pulled out a bamboo tube from his cloak.

The body of the large crab needed to be purified. He had a Konjosui based Shikigami in his bamboo tube. He calls it "Gengen".

Konjosui is the purest water in the world, in other words, it was also the most corrosive liquid.

Ryuuji pulled the cap off the bamboo tube and sprinkled a small amount of "Gengen" towards the body of the large crab.

Once the body made contact with the Konjosui, it melted and disappeared in smoke.

Ryuuji recalled "Gengen" back into the bamboo tube and called for Mamiru, signalling his intent to leave.

But Mamiru did not move at all.

"Mamiru, what's wrong?"

"Exterminate youkai...youkai are evil...absolute evil..."

Mamiru started to talk to himself. Like a switch had been pressed.

Ryuuji tsked, and sighed.

---This robot is really hard to operate...

Then, he walked towards Mamiru.

"That's right. Youkai are evil, we are good people. Okay, let's go."

After saying that, Ryuuji pushed Mamiru gently from behind.

After leaving the park, the two of them headed towards the alley that would lead to the main road.

Just as they were about to exit the alley, the two of them passed an apartment, two children were squatting at the entrance.

One of them was a boy around eight years old, while the other was a girl around five years old, and seemed to be that boy's younger sister. The boy had short hair while the girl had a bob hairstyle. She had soft looking hair.

It was already past 11pm. It was very late for children to still be hanging around and playing outside at this hour.

The two children were flipping through a picture book, and as they lifted their heads and saw Ryuuji and Mamiru, they shouted in fright. That was expected. Both men were wearing black cloaks, and looked suspicious, and one of them was really tall. They didn't look like good people at all.

The little girl started to tear up, the boy quickly stood up and moved in front of the girl.

"Ryuuji, there are children this late at night, suspicious."

Mamiru said. In a blink of an eye, he was already holding one talisman.

"Don't be so anxious, they're not youkai."

Ryuuji quickly pushed back Mamiru's hand, but the girl still cried. The cries sounded a lot like a scream, which caused Ryuuji to frown.

"I'm sorry. Big brother isn't a bad person, so don't cry anymore, okay?"

"You're lying! You're obviously a bad person."

The boy stuck out his finger and shouted.

"People who wear black cloaks are all bad people! You must be here to kidnap us!"

"I already said I'm not..."

However, the boy still had the expression that nothing they say will get through to him, and continued to glare at Ryuuji. The girl was also crying with no sign of stopping. If they stayed, the situation might get harder to handle. If an adult ran out and called the police, there will be no end to the explanations they had to give.

"Okay okay, I'm sorry that I scared you. We are only passing through, we're going now, okay?"

Ryuuji said as he pushed Mamiru forward.

Before the pair of suspicious men in black clothes completely left his line of sight, the boy did not plan to avert his eyes and kept staring at Ryuuji. Halfway through, Ryuuji stopped suddenly---

"Boy, is that your younger sister?"

Even though that question wasn't important at all, Ryuuji suddenly had the urge to ask this.

The boy glanced behind him and after hesitating for a short while, he nodded.

"I see. Take this chance to cultivate your relationship then."

Hearing Ryuuji say that, the boy, who had been wide eyed the whole time, blinked. He did not seem to understand why Ryuuji would say such a thing to him. Ryuuji didn't care about it that much either, and continued,

"A younger sister, this sort of being would probably suddenly dominate you just before entering middle school, so you have to be careful, understand?"

After that, Ryuuji did not turn back at all and left the scene quickly.

Chapter 3

Nishi in the north of Kyoto is where the Keikain main house is located.

The day after bringing Mamiru out for patrols, the main house called for a meeting. The meeting would be led by the Head of the family Hidemoto, and the leaders of the branch families will be attending.

Ryuuji is an Onmyoji with the bloodline of the main house, so he will also attend the meetings. However, there would normally be no new proposals or reports at the meetings, and would always end on a boring note.

It was the same for today's meeting. The contents, expectedly, was about more youkai sightings and weird phenomenon occurring because of the weakening of the seal or a certain Onmyoji from a certain family progressing well in their training, so Ryuuji could only lean against a pillar, and listen without paying much attention at all.

As for Mamiru, he isn't around. Ever since he went patrolling with Ryuuji, Mamiru started to live in the main house, but he is not required to attend meetings at the moment. The main house had instructed him before, unless there was a need, Mamiru did not have to attend any meetings. Although, even if he did attend the meetings, it was most likely that he would speak like a robot, without his own opinion.

Just then, one of the members requested for Ryuuji to speak. Ryuuji recounted the events which occurred during the patrol the night before.

Such as Mamiru's overwhelmingly powerful abilities, and the youkai they met are of a species which they have never seen before.

Hearing about the new species of youkai, whispers were heard in the room, but no one stepped up to voice their opinion on the subject. Ryuuji's report ended like this.

After ending the meeting, Ryuuji left the room, and tapped a certain person's shoulder.

"Ryuuji, you haven't changed at all, still showing that uninterested look during meetings."

The person who was standing next to Ryuuji and speaking to him is Keikain Haigo. He is an Onmyoji from the Idoro style branch family.

Keikain Haigo is about 40-something years old. Spectacles rested on his puffed cheeks, and his hair is combed into a three seven parted style. He did not look like an Onmyoji at all, resembling a teacher and has been nicknamed "Vice Principal" within the Keikain family. The fact that he was not called a principal can be something to be pondered about.

"The meeting is really boring, which is why I have that expression. If the reports were more interesting, I would obviously listen quite happily."

"If you complain that the reports are boring, why don't you say them instead? Oh yeah, did Yura contact you?"

Haigo said, with an expression that he had suddenly thought of it.

"Yura, you say?"

"That's right, I heard that she is somewhere in Tokyo...somewhere called Ukiyoe, didn't see transfer there specially for training? Did you hear anything interesting from her?"

"None at all. Rather than interesting things, I have not been in contact with her at all. I have no idea of what she is doing right now..."

“No contact at all? That’s worrying.”

Haigo, who said this, showed a caring-for-family expression, and even though the two of them have blood relations, it looked amusing in Ryuuji’s eyes such that he couldn’t help but laugh.

“Aren’t the youkai causing a lot of trouble in Ukiyoe? If something bad happens to Yura, it’ll be really bad.”

“You’re thinking too much about it. Then again, if she got involved in a conflict, and got into trouble, she should solve it on her own. Yura is an Onmyoji from the main house and the successor to the head of the family; it’ll cause more trouble to the family if we’re too nice to her.”

Even though it sounded very cruel, those were Ryuuji’s true thoughts. Going to Ukiyoe was Yura’s decision. If Yura met with any trouble there, she should take responsibility for what she said, and try to solve the problem on her own without seeking help from the main family, or cause the main house to care about the problem.

“Okay...if you, as Yura’s older brother, said so, then I should say any more as a member of the branch family.”

After Haigo said, “Contact her sometimes,” he walked in the direction of the porch. But he turned around after a while,

“Oh, that’s right. Ryuuji, let me ask you another thing. Do you usually read books?”

“Read? I guess I do...”

“Then, do you want to read this book? It’s a famous work.”

Saying that, Haigo took out a book. The intricate cover was thick, and on top it wrote---

“Why Do People Get Attracted By Muscles?”

That was the title of the book. The author was “Keikain Haigo”.

“...Why is it written by you?”

Haigo ignored Ryuuji’s cold look, and continued,

“This book contains my years of research, the result of my blood, sweat and tears. Even though the publishing costs came from my pocket, but I’m currently talking to the bookstores about putting them on the shelves. Why don’t you have a copy?”

“Isn’t it a gift?”

“I can give you a 20% discount---

Before he finished his sentence, Ryuuji left quickly. Haigo called him from behind, but Ryuuji ignored it totally.

Chapter 4

Tonight, Ryuuji also brought Mamiru along for patrols.

The location of the patrol was mostly similar to yesterday, a few kilometres south of the Kyoto station.

“Ryuuji, why are we walking the same places?”

Mamiru asked as he walked.

“Because strange creatures appear here often. Going to a place with no youkai does not help in your training.”

“Why do strange creatures appear here more often?”

He asked again. Such an enthusiastic student. Therefore, Ryuuji started to explain,

“This is the basic idea for patrolling, listen well. The first reason, this is the outside of the boundary. Second reason, if the streets of Kyoto are split into north and south, where we are now is the south. As for why the southern area is chosen, you can recall the locations of the eight seals.”

Mamiru remained expressionless, and it was hard for others to tell if he’s thinking about the map, but Ryuuji continued,

“Amongst the eight seals, the first, second, third and sixth, which are Nijo castle, Sokoku-ji, Rokukin-ji, and Ryuen-ji, these four locations are in the northern area and are located rather close together. We also include Nishi, which means that the Keikain main house is located in the north as well. Compared to that, the four seals located in the south are more spread apart compared to the northern area. In other words, the Onmyoji forces are mostly concentrated in the northern area. If I’m a youkai, I would choose to take a stroll in the south.”

“I see. I understand.”

Mamiru said.

Do you really understand? Even though he wanted to retort in that way, but Mamiru responded quickly without any hesitation. Actually, Ryuuji had no intention of simplifying his explanation. In addition, as long as they come across youkai, all of this would be proved.

There was a short building without any lights, and had a car park opposite it. There were no cars inside, and no lights to illuminate the paths. There was a strange space in the air which was shaped like a spiral pillar, which was currently emitting youki.

“It should be coming from that car park.”

“Yes, there are three of them.”

Hearing Mamiru say that, Ryuuji gave a look of awe.

---This guy can feel it too, not bad.

Judging from the youki emitted from the car park, Ryuuji felt that there might be three youkai as well. With a smart student, the teacher will have an easier job.

The two of them walked towards the car park. The dark space was emitted the aura of three youkai. Getting closer, the three youkai suddenly attacked at the same time.

They were Oni carrying short spears. The three youkai stuck close to one another, forming a blade forest, stabbing towards the both of them.

Ryuuji and Mamiru dodged to the left and right respectively, avoiding the attack. The three Oni brushed past Ryuuji, and immediately flipped to face Ryuuji.

The three Oni had the same appearance, just like triplets. They also had three eyes, and three horns in the centre of their foreheads, three teeth can be seen in their long canine like mouths. Everything was in groups of three from head to tail.

“We are---”

“three-in-one youkai---”

“known as Tomoe Oni.”

The three Oni spoke one after another. Even their voices are the same.

“Tomoe Oni...?”

Whether it’s the appearance or the name, Ryuuji had no recollection of them. This is the first time meeting these youkai. The Tomoe Oni look like traditional youkai, not as gross as the large crab from yesterday, but they’re definitely a new species of youkai.

“Actually avoiding our attack---”

“Definitely not a normal human---”

“Who are the two of you?”

The Tomoe Oni said in order again. Ryuuji scoffed and said,

“You don’t have to split one sentence into three parts, is there a need to take that much trouble? That’s right, we’re not normal humans, “the police of the youkai world”, and we have to arrest you immediately. However, if you meet up with us Keikain family, you will be given a death sentence.”

“Who are you kidding!”

“We are going to use this short spear!”

“And coat it with human blood!”

The three Oni’s face contorted with rage, and the youki emitted became denser.

Ryuuji said calmly,

“Mamiru, today it’s one against multiple opponents. Go.”

“Okay.”

As he answered, Mamiru jumped forward, closing the distance between him and the opponents in one go. The three Oni were shocked by Mamiru suddenly appearing in front of them, and hastily raised their spears. But, Mamiru’s talismans have already surrounded them.

“Perish!”

Mamiru shouted and the talismans, forming a circle, shot out a white lightning attack.

Just as Ryuuji thought that Mamiru was going to instantly defeat the youkai today as well, the Tomoe Oni suddenly jumped, jumping above the lightning. It looks like the three Oni are very nimble.

Mamiru backed up with the same speed as before. Ryuuji followed suit, moving back as well.

As a result, Ryuuji and Mamiru were in a situation where the backs were now against the wall of the car park.

The three Oni dispersed while holding their spears and they seem to intend to block the escape routes for the both of them.

The two parties ended up staring each other down for a few seconds. Ryuuji glanced towards Mamiru. Mamiru’s breathing seemed to be steady. He is the same as usual when summoning his shikigami, in a very calm state.

At that moment, Ryuuji frowned. The youki in the area started to change. It's like noise that suddenly appeared within an originally clear sound. Did Mamiru sense the change?

"Mamiru, are you alright by yourself?"

Ryuuji asked.

"Yes. I'll eliminate all three of them."

Mamiru had just finished his sentence when the enemies started to move.

The Oni in the middle thrust his spear towards Mamiru. Mamiru jumped upwards, avoiding the attack. Then, the remaining two Oni threw their spears towards Mamiru. Changing position in the air is not an easy thing to do, and it was impossible to dodge the attack. Just as the spears were about to pierce Mamiru, he stretched out both hands and caught both spears.

---That's quite amazing.

Ryuuji felt some admiration. Without avoiding the attack but grabbing the spears instead shows that besides Mamiru's exorcism abilities, the strength of his body and reaction speed were amazing as well.

After landing, Mamiru broke the two spears into half with his knee.

The three Oni panicked for a while when they suddenly lost their weapons, but they quickly bent over and opened their mouths. Then they jumped forward, using their three teeth to execute a bite attack.

Mamiru was very calm. He spread out the talismans in front of him, stopping the three Oni from advancing.

"Perish!"

Lightning crashed downwards at that moment, striking the three Oni's bodies in an instant.

The three Oni screamed, and fell to the ground.

The surroundings darkened once more. But the three youkai did not die, letting out low moans.

"Such...such a scary guy..."

"Even if the three of us work together..."

"We weren't able to win..."

They still spoke in order even though they were about to die, making it rather amusing.

"Mamiru, finish it quickly."

Ryuuji said.

"Okay."

Mamiru took one talisman and put it in front of his forehead, preparing to execute a final attack.

Just as Mamiru was about to wave the talisman towards the three Oni, Ryuuji spoke,

"Wrong, Mamiru."

"?"

Mamiru stopped.

“The finish I was talking about *did not refer to this.*”

After Ryuuji finished, he pulled out a bamboo tube from his cloak. He quickly pulled out the stopper.

“ ‘Garou’, devour!”

He ordered the water Shikigami.

The large Garou formed out of water ran behind Ryuuji, attacking the *fourth youkai*.

Garou bit down on the opponent and turned into water immediately, entering the Oni’s body and merging with the liquids inside. After that, Ryuuji gave another order.

“ ‘Gengen’, run!”

Once he said that, the Shikigami started to change the liquids he controlled into a raging stream, moving about violently in the Oni’s body.

“Gu...gwah!”

After being on the receiving end of such a strong attack in his body, the fourth Oni collapsed even before he could pick up his spear.

“Such a pity, fourth Oni.”

Ryuuji smiled evilly.

“You...felt it...?”

The fourth Oni coughed up the liquid, and looked towards Ryuuji with hatred.

“If you wanted to erase your youki, you should do it more thoroughly.”

When he fought with the three Oni, there was a disturbance in the youki. It was that feeling that made Ryuuji suspect that there was a fourth youkai.

Three eyes, three horns, even three teeth, and the three youkai attacking at the same time made people think there will be three of them. Even their name was “Tomoe Oni”. Its purpose is for people to make a link to “Tomoe mark”, a really bold thing to do.

T/N: Refer to <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tomoe.jpg> for a picture of the Tomoe mark

“Having people have the misconception that there are three Oni in the group, while the fourth hides in the darkness to strike at the right moment---I won’t dislike that way of fighting, but you are too careless at the end.”

Ryuuji said, and then he turned to Mamiru.

“Mamiru, it’s the same for you as well. One act of carelessness can cost you your life. Don’t let your guard down just because you think you’re winning. Instead, when the situation becomes more advantageous, you should be looking at it more calmly.”

“Understood.”

“Get rid of the fourth one properly as well.”

“Okay.”

An honest student, very good. Ryuuji turned around, and a flash of lightning appeared behind him.

The siblings they met the night before were still outside the apartment tonight.

As he met the boy's eyes, Ryuuji tsked to himself.

---Why are they still here...

But just turning around and leaving felt wrong. In addition, the pair of siblings have already saw Ryuuji, and must be thinking why did this guy appear again. Fortunately, the younger sister didn't cry today.

"You're here again! If you do anything weird, I'm going to call the police!"

He could be feeling confident because he succeeded in chasing Ryuuji away yesterday, the older brother did not have any fear showing on his face this time, and shouted threats to Ryuuji.

"Didn't I say I won't do anything to the both of you? This road is how we go back home, relax."

Ryuuji said, and at the same time, decided that he should take a different route tomorrow.

As they walked, the siblings were the same as yesterday, continuously looking at them.

At that moment, the younger sister opened her mouth to ask,

"Big brother, are you from Studio Park?"

"Ah?"

Ryuuji turned around. He saw the younger sister's face as she hid behind her older brother, filled with fear and curiosity.

The Studio Park referred to the theme park in Toei. There were backgrounds needed to film a period drama, and was normally open to the public to visit. This place not only re-enacts the streets of Edo, there were also part time actors dressed up as warriors and the ladies of that era walking around.

Kimono and high Geta. Mamiru still looked okay, but Ryuuji did not dress in the modern style at all. It may be because of that did he get mistaken as an actor from a period drama.

"No, we are not people from a period drama. We are..."

"But you are wearing a kimono."

The sister asked.

"We are Gofuku merchants from Nishi. The person here is still an apprentice, so he cannot wear a kimono yet."

T/N: Gofuku are the earliest type of kimono.

Ryuuji casually told a lie. Telling lies are his strong point. The children would not understand what it meant even if he told them honestly that he is an Onmyoji who keeps youkai in check anyway. However, another *child* said at that moment,

"Ryuuji, we are Onmyoji, not Gofuku merchants."

"Don't say unnecessary things!"

Ryuuji scolded softly as he kicked Mamiru with his geta.

“Big brother, is your name Ryuuji?”

The one who spoke is the older brother. Rather than the term Onmyoji, he was more interested in Ryuuji’s name.

“Hm? Oh, that’s right, my name is Ryuuji.”

“I’m called Ryuuta. I’m only different from big brother by one.”

Only different by one character, that should be what Ryuuta was referring to.

“I’m called Yuri.”

The sister did not want to lose, and gave her name as well.

Yuri...also one character away from Yura, Ryuuji thought. But there was no need to say that out loud.

“Then how about big brother?”

Ryuuta asked Mamiru.

“He’s called Mamiru.”

Ryuuji answered for him. In response to that, Ryuuta and Yuri looked at each other and started to laugh.

“Mamiru? A boy’s name is Mommy-ru!”

“Haha! How funny!”

Being able to laugh so hard over a small matter, children are that sort of being. They shouted and cried after seeing Ryuuji yesterday, and laughed so happily today, it looks like children are really innocent. However, the big child standing next to Ryuuji did not smile at all.

“Ryuuji, are they laughing at me?”

If he nodded at that time, even if it was a joke, this big child might just pull out his talismans. It was too dangerous, and he definitely could not do that.

“They aren’t laughing at you, they are welcoming you. They’re so happy after hearing your name, isn’t that good?”

“Hey, big brother mommy.”

Ryuuta said to Mamiru.

“My name is Mamiru.”

Mamiru corrected it immediately, but Ryuuta seemed to ignore it.

“Big brother mommy is so tall, that’s awesome. I want to be as big as big brother as well. I’ll be great at soccer that way!”

Ryuuta said as he made a kicking motion.

“Big brother Ryuuta, if you want to grow taller, then you can use wear geta like that kimono big brother? That way, big brother Ryuuta will definitely grow taller tomorrow!”

“That’s right! It’ll be okay if I wear geta!”

“It’s not okay at all!”

Ryuuji retorted the two young children, whose eyes were shining.

“Kid, let me tell you. These geta are not for growing taller, don’t get it wrong. Then again, being taller may not be a good thing. As they say, everything has a limit, and it’ll be perfect when everything is optimal...”

Ryuuji wanted to continue, but seeing that the siblings had frozen there with wide eyes, he could only brush through the whole topic with a cough.

“In short, children shouldn’t think so much, just eat more.”

Just like that, Ryuuji forced the topic to an end. Then, Ryuuji suddenly thought... where were their parents?

It was like that yesterday, and today as well, it’s the middle of the night, what were the siblings doing here? Don’t the parents have anything to say about it?

“Do the both of you live in this apartment? Where are your father and mother?”

Ryuuji asked. Ryuuta answered,

“That’s right, our home is here.”

With further questioning, he found out that the siblings come from a single parent family. Their mother had passed away from an illness, and the father had raised them by himself ever since. Because the father always returns home late because of work, so the siblings wait here every night.

Unable to return home even though it’s so late, isn’t this company being too heartless? Ryuuji thought.

“It’s fine if you want to wait for your dad to come home, but why does it have to be outdoors?”

“Because we’ll be able to see our father more quickly this way.”

Ryuuta said. If the father heard it, he might not be able to hold it in and cry.

“I see. But it’s really late now, be careful. Don’t play pranks because you’re bored.”

“We won’t be bored. Daddy gave this to us.”

Yuri said, and picked up something from her feet. It was the picture book from yesterday, but it was actually a sketch book. As long as they draw, they shouldn’t be bored.

Chapter 5

The next day, when Ryuuji was in his room in the main house, one of Hidemoto’s attendants said to him through the paper door.

“Ryuuji-san, Hidemoto requests that you go to his room.”

“Understood.”

He said quickly. Actually, he had decided to look for Hidemoto later.

Ryuuji walked through the spacious mansion to Hidemoto’s room.

“Did you go patrolling with Mamiru last night?”

Hidemoto sat opposite Ryuuji and asked.

“Yeah. Three...no, four youkai were killed. Oh yeah, do you know about a youkai known as ‘Tomoe Oni’?”

Ryuuji asked this. The reason why he wanted to look for Hidemoto in the first place was to ask this.

“Tomoe Oni...?”

But Hidemoto only looked confused and said,

“No, this is the first time I’ve heard of it. Is it the youkai you exterminated last night?”

“That’s right...they have three eyes, three horns and three teeth. They pretended that they were a group of three youkai, but there was actually a fourth youkai hiding in the back to attack. That means, if even you did not know about the Tomoe Oni, then it is really a new species of youkai.”

“New species...you seem to have experienced the same situation two days ago?”

“Yeah, ever since I went out with Mamiru, this is the second time we met up with a new species. Even though a new species isn’t a rare occurrence, but encountering the same situation twice in the same area still feels suspicious.”

Hearing Ryuuji say that, Hidemoto’s gaze suddenly shifted to the tatami mats next to him, with a stern look on his face. After a while, Hidemoto opened his mouth, seemingly with a heavy heart,

“This incident, I’m not sure if it is related to what you said, but...”

After the opening act, Hidemoto finally said the real reason why he called Ryuuji.

“Ryuuji, I want you to investigate a temple with Mamiru.”

“Temple?”

“Yes. In southern Kyoto, near Fushime Inari Shrine. This morning, the abbot of the temple came to ask for help. He heard that the hall has already become a youkai’s nest, so he came to ask us for help to exterminate the youkai.”

“Hey, wait, that Fushime Inari, can it be...”

“Yes. That place is also very close to where you and Mamiru patrolled.”

From a few days ago, there were a lot of reported sightings of large numbers of youkai. Because the youkai did not attack humans, the temple tolerated it for the time being. However, their numbers increased and they now occupy the whole temple.

“Even though I did not see the whole situation, but there seems to be a large amount of them. Even if they are small youkai, they still can cause a lot of trouble if they are gathered together. Ryuuji, can you go with Mamiru to exterminate those youkai?”

“...The two of us?”

Ryuuji tsked, but he still nodded reluctantly.

---Fine, this won’t be a wasted trip anyway, it should be of some help.

He thought. Exterminating the youkai in the temple meant that he needed to fight continuously. For Mamiru, it would be a good way to train his endurance.

In addition, what bothered Ryuuji is that the temple is near Fushime Inari Shrine. The true reason behind the new species they keep encountering on patrols might be found in that temple.

Hidemoto said, “Ask the abbot for details”, and told him the location of the temple.

I’ll set off with Mamiru tonight---Ryuuji said this, and stood up.

After leaving Hidemoto's room, Ryuuji, on the corridor on the way back to his room, passed by the door of Yura's room, there he met Akifusa from the branch family.

"Akifusa, you came?"

"It's Ryuuji. Yeah, I wanted to check something."

Akifusa said as he gestured towards Yura's room with his eyes.

Ever since Yura went to Tokyo to train, Yura's room unintentionally became a storage room. The people in the mansion piled their books which didn't fit in their rooms there, and as days and months passed, Yura's room naturally became a resource room.

"You're still the same as always, passionate about research. Didn't you read those books a few times such that you can almost memorise everything?"

Ryuuji said as he looked at Akifusa's arms. The books in his arms all had something to do with the production of spirit swords. Akifusa's house belonged to the Yaso style, which specialized in making spirit swords.

"Good research books would allow people to discover something new every time it is read. The parts which you did not pay attention to before can bring about inspiration if you read it again."

"Oh really?"

Ryuuji shrugged.

This person Akifusa, like Ryuuji, Yura and Mamiru from the branch family, had their talents discovered when they were young, and received high praise from the Keikain family. Even though he developed his talents very early, he is very dutiful and is willing to work hard. He made his first spirit sword at three years old, and was seen as a child genius, but Akifusa did not feel satisfied with just that, and continued to polish his research. Talent and hard work would bear fruit in the end. Afterwards, Akifusa was assigned to watch over the first seal in the spiral seal, Nijou castle, and was recommended as a candidate of the next head.

"You're really hardworking, how admirable. Looking for information in the *resource room*, then making spirit swords in the workshop. You can spend a few days on such a monotonous job, amazing. I wouldn't be able to do that."

"Ryuuji, spirit swords are the result of the accumulation of simple and repeated actions. The amount of effort the swordsmith puts in would be reflected in the spirit sword. In other words, the swordsmith's will is contained inside. A spirit sword containing a strong will would possess a lot of power. In order to make that spirit sword, I would be willing to spend as much time in the workshop as required."

"Will? However, if the will is too strong, it might be pretty terrifying too."

Ryuuji said and smiled at Akifusa.

At that moment, Ryuuji thought about Demonic Possession. In the Yaso style, there is a secret technique passed down through generations, known as the "Demonic Possession Technique". However, if the Demonic Possession was used the wrong way, it might become a dangerous forbidden technique.

Demonic Possession is inserting the power of the Shikigami into the weapon or the human body, a skill that increases the attack power greatly. When executing the Demonic Possession Technique, the skill user must completely abandon his human soul. If they accept the Shikigami's power without abandoning their human nature, the Yin and Yang will mix together, forming a grey area.

It is a dangerous thing to form a grey area. Not only would it make it easier to get possessed by the enemy, it is easier to self destruct in this unstable state. From the yin yang, black and white Onmyoji theory, the grey area is definitely an anomaly.

Akifusa sighed, and said,

“Ryuuji, every time I meet you, you would always mock me.”

“Since when did I mock you? It’s because you’re too sensitive.”

Ryuuji gave a silly grin. Even if he saw Akifusa clench his fists slightly, he still continued,

“I really admire you from the bottom of my heart, no matter what you are the guardian of a point in the seal, it’s not something you can do just because you want it, it’s worthy of respect.”

After Ryuuji said this, he continued to walk forward.

Akifusa’s stare, was transmitted from behind---liar---that stare seemed to convey that message.

---That’s right. I am a big liar.

Chapter 6

One kilometer south of Fushime Inari Shrine is where the temple is located.

When Ryuuji and Mamiru finished their preparations in the main house and reached the temple, it was already past ten o clock at night.

At that time, the abbot who contacted the main house was waiting for them at the bottom of the stone steps. This abbot did not have a lot of hair, and was about fifty years old. His red cheeks made him look like he had lived a fortunate life.

When they called out for the abbot, the abbot immediately held back his tears as he showed a relieved expression.

“Masters from the Keikain house, you’re finally here!”

Ryuuji roughly knew about the existence of this temple. But it was only limited to the temple’s name and location, it was also the first time he met with the abbot.

The Keikain family are Onmyojis, and obviously, they have connections to the temples and shrines in Kyoto ever since the ancient times. But, without considering the sizes, Kyoto has countless temples and shrines. They communicate with some of them frequently, others not so much. The temple which asked them to exterminate youkai is the latter.

The abbot started to talk about an ancient topic about how the abbot two generations before had very good relations with one of the branch family members, but Ryuuji did not listen at all. He wants to know about something else.

“Abbot, I’m going to ask you directly, you said that the temple had been taken over by youkai, what happened?”

Ryuuji went to the core of the topic. The abbot’s face only darkened. Even his voice became heavy.

“It’s horrible, and cannot be described at all. You’ll know after you see this...”

After the abbot said, “Please come this way”, he climbed up the short flight of stone steps. Ryuuji and Mamiru followed.

After climbing the stairs, there was a gate. There were a row of eaves made out of brick tiles, and it looked very grand. It was surrounded by mud walls, and was quite spacious, as there was fifty feet between the gate and the main hall.

“Hey, what is this...”

Ryuuji said something which sounded like a sigh.

The main hall was filled with youkai. The roof, under the eaves, the pillars and the walls were all crawling with youkai, crowding out the hall.

A group of small youkai with wings were currently pulling out the tiles on the roof, and throwing the tiles far away. There were helmets and skulls swaying slightly under the eaves, with what seem like ghost fires weaving between them. The large golden snake was coiled around the pillar, and the other pillars were chewed out of shape by a furry creature. The doors of the main hall were open, and the situation inside could be seen, it was filled with youkai, as expected. The youkai were drinking and partying inside the main hall, and destroying items, laughing loudly. Every area in the main hall had been stomped on by countless youkai, and the whole structure looked close to collapsing. Like a large organ with a huge problem.

“About one week ago, I found a youkai in the corner of the main hall.”

The abbot spoke.

“I was quite scared at that time, but after I shouted, that youkai ran away. But from the second day onwards, the youkai started to increase, it had become like this on the third day.”

“You’re the only person left in the temple?”

Ryuuji asked. The abbot nodded weakly.

“My family was here at first, but I had them leave after this happened, and stayed here. I’m only able to stay alive because I help the youkai run errands.

Under the command of the youkai, I became someone who brings the wine and food, the abbot said, in a self-mocking tone.

“Abbot, for things to become like this, are there any possible reasons?”

“None at all. They appeared suddenly, and increased very quickly.”

Ryuuji nodded as he carefully observed the youkai which occupied the main hall.

---They all seem to be new species.

The youkai which filled the hall were species he had never seen before. The youkai he met during patrols should have come from this place.

“The liar for the new species of youkai is here, huh...”

Ryuu said to himself, and the abbot did not hear it well.

“Eh? What did you say? New species?”

But Ryuuji did not reply, and said,

“Abbot, leave everything to us. The Keikain family will try our best to get rid of these youkai.”

“Thank you! Thank you, Masters!”

The abbot grasped Ryuuji’s hand, then grasped Mamiru’s hand, bowing continuously in thanks.

“This temple is something passed down for generations, yet I let it become damaged, and even became their lackey. I’m extremely regretful about it, and cannot face my ancestors. You Masters must help me, please!”

“It must be hard on you this whole time. But you can relax now.”

Ryuuji patted the abbot’s shoulder, and the abbot lowered his head in thanks once more. Then, he lifted his head and asked,

“Oh right, when would the others arrive?”

“Others?”

Ryuuji’s eyes narrowed.

“That’s right, besides the both of you, the Keikain family should have other Onmyoji right? When would they be coming?”

“Abbot.”

Ryuuji smiled.

“It seemed like the main house did not explain things properly. There won’t be other people coming here. It’s just the two of us.”

“O...only the two of you?”

Ryuuji nodded towards the abbot, who was too stunned to say anything, and said to Mamiru,

“Mamiru, it’s time to clean up.”

“Okay.”

Ever since they arrived at the temple, this is the first time Mamiru spoke.

“Pl...please wait! There’s so much youkai, it’s too dangerous with just the two of you!”

Ryuuji and Mamiru left the helpless abbot behind, and entered the main hall on their own.

The large amount of youki which occupied the main hall formed a large spiral and approached them slowly. The black cloaks which the both of them wore fluttered slightly.

Once some of the youkai discovered that there were two Onmyoji approaching, the other youkai found out as well, like a chain reaction. The originally noisy hall quietened down, and the youkai rested their sights on the two of them one after another. Ryuuji stopped walking and gave a cold smile.

One of the youkai in the main hall yelled angrily.

“Who are you people! What do you want!”

“We are Onmyoji from the Keikain family. We heard that they are youkai running rampant here, so we specially came here from Nishi to exterminate youkai.”

“What did you say! You bastards!”

The first youkai who rushed out to yell at them became the first sacrifice.

“Mamiru, go.”

Mamiru’s talisman flew out at almost the same instant when Ryuuji spoke. Under the barrage of lightning, the small fry who yelled turned into ash.

The scramble starts now.

The youkai yelled collectively and charged, surrounding the both of them. However, both of them remained calm, and got rid of the youkai in front of them one by one.

Basically, Ryuuji let Mamiru handle everything, and he only observed the battle from the sidelines. If any of the youkai approached him, at most, Ryuuji would only use “Gengen” to get rid of them, not planning to go on the offensive.

And Mamiru’s fighting style, can only be described as ‘straightforward’. He didn’t wait for the enemy to attack, but approached the opponents instead. He threw out his talismans quickly, shouting “Perish!”, releasing a lightning attack. Jumping over the charred bodies, he threw out his talismans again, and shouted “Perish!” once more. The large man wearing a cloak went through the youkai like a tank, and it was very satisfying and exciting to watch. And even if he used his Shikigami many times, Mamiru’s expression did not change. His physical abilities seem to be very good, causing Ryuuji to tsk in wonder. During the first practical battle, Mamiru seemed short of breath. Now that he saw this, it might have been because his feelings were a bit high strung, Mamiru’s body is actually very strong.

“Caught you.”

He suddenly heard a voice next to him, and Ryuuji realised that he had been hugged from behind by a wavy haired Warashi youkai. The youkai is about as tall as a child, but his arms were un-proportionately thick. The Warashi youkai used its inhuman strength to trap Ryuuji’s body, but Ryuuji only hmphed and laughed.

“Splashing some water around, I’m going to suffocate you!”

Its arms covered in thick stiff hairs increased in power. The sound of bones rubbing against each other were heard from his back and arms, the bamboo tubes in Ryuuji’s hands fell to the floor.

“Hmph!”

Ryuuji lifted his foot, and mercilessly stamped on the Warashi youkai’s foot with his geta.

The youkai screamed in pain, and loosened its hold suddenly.

Ryuuji used the chance to break free, and pulled out a new bamboo tube from his cloak.

The Warashi youkai, who was kneeling on the ground clutching his foot, shouted when he saw this,

“Ah! Don’t splash any water on me!”

“It’s not water this time, idiot.”

Ryuuji smirked, and used the bamboo tube to smack the youkai in the head. The youkai with inhuman strength fainted immediately after receiving the attack.

After fighting and fighting, the youkai still continued to emerge from the main hall.

However, Mamiru did not seem tired out at all, and continued to exterminate the youkai, and finally dwindled the numbers of the youkai in the main hall.

Ryuuji waved his hand, and easily melted the youkai in front of him, then he said to Mamiru,

“Mamiru, I’m going to take a look inside. If any youkai runs outside, exterminate them immediately.”

Hearing Mamiru replying behind him, Ryuuji entered the main hall.

Climbing up the steps, entering the main hall. The youkai inside have definitely decreased by a lot, and could now be counted.

The floor of the main hall was made with tatami, and there was a golden altar directly in front. The gold leaf was already peeling. The beams have snapped, and there were a few holes in the roof. Just like a ruin.

Just then, a wave of heat was felt on his right side. A large snake had attacked by breathing fire. Ryuuji dodged the long stream of fire, and used “Gengen” to melt the snake’s body.

The next second, the youkai in the main hall attacked together. Ryuuji got rid of them one by one without any trouble. Just as there were only a few youkai left, Ryuuji momentarily stopped attacking.

Ryuuji already knew that this is a nest of new species of youkai. But what he wants to know now, is where these youkai came from.

“Hey, the few of you, answer my question.”

Ryuuji stood in the middle of the hall, and said while looking at the youkai,

“All of you are new species, right? New species refer to youkai who have appeared recently, and not the youkai who have existed since long ago.”

“So what?”

The nearest youkai replied. That youkai was covered in spines, like a hedgehog.

“Where did all of you come from? How were you born? Even though new species aren’t strange, but increasing at such a rapid rate is not normal.”

“How would I know!”

The hedgehog youkai yelled.

“We don’t care about new species or what not, and we don’t know where we come from. When we opened our eyes, we were already here. This world has too many humans, it’s bothersome. We want to kill all the humans, and eat them! That’s all there is to it!”

That’s right! What he said is correct! The other youkai agreed. Kill all humans! Eat them! Kill all humans! Eat them! The group of youkai started to chant.

“I see. Okay, I understand.”

Ryuuji nodded. Even though he did not receive a satisfactory answer, but Ryuuji still asked. It looks like it will be no use if he continued asking.

“Like hell you would understand! Die!”

The remaining youkai attacked together at the yell of the hedgehog. But Ryuuji only waved the bamboo tube in his hand slightly, and turned all the youkai into white smoke.

Ryuuji frowned, like he had smelled the rotting corpses, and kept his bamboo tube into his cloak.

At that moment, Mamiru climbed the stone steps and entered.

“Mamiru, have you got rid of everything?”

“Yes, I’ve gotten rid of them.”

Mamiru’s voice was very calm, and it cannot be seen that he had just gone through a fierce battle.

“I’ve also cleaned up the youkai on the roof.”

“Really? Thanks for the hard work.”

Just as Ryuuji replied, the abbot entered the main hall cautiously.

“This...my god...”

The abbot surveyed the cleaned out main hall with widened eyes.

“So many youkai, and there’s none left now...the Onmyoji from Keikain are so powerful...”

“This is the first time I have seen such a serious problem, but it has been solved, everything’s fine now.”

“Thank you Masters! Thank you so much!”

The abbot said repeatedly with tears in his eyes.

Even though the reason for the mass production of new youkai was not known, but the nest had been cleaned, so they still completed their mission.

“You can retrieve your family members now. Then we’ll be making a move first.”

Ryuuji said, hurrying Mamiru. But they were stopped by the abbot.

“Please wait! The two of you must be tired? Do you want to have a cold drink, and leave after taking a rest?”

Chapter 7

There was another building behind the main hall. The two of them were led there.

The abbot led the two of them to the guest room, talking continuously the whole time. It might be because he felt relieved that the youkai have been chased away, so he became very talkative.

“Why do Onmyoji wear such strange clothes? It’s very rare of people to wear cloaks like these nowadays.”

“Not all Onmyoji wear clothes like this. It just that both of us happen to wear this cloak.”

Ryuuji said while grabbing his cloak.

“I see. When I saw the both of you Masters exterminate youkai, one moment pulling out bamboo tubes from the cloak and one moment pulling out talismans, it’s as if you were doing magic.”

“My bamboo tubes are all in my cloak, it’s easier to transport them this way. I should put pigeons inside instead, I might even earn more money like this.”

Ryuuji said. Even though it wasn’t that funny, the abbot laughed loudly.

After a turn in the corridor, the two of them were brought to a tatami lined room.

“Please wait here, I’ll come back soon...ah, the two of you must be hot, I’ll hang up the cloaks for you.”

Saying that, the abbot took the cloaks from Ryuuji and Mamiru and hung the cloaks in the next room, which was separated by a paper door. And when he returned, he smiled and said, "I'll be back soon", and left the room.

Ryuuji and Mamiru sat at the head of the table. After a while, the abbot returned. Cups with flower motifs on them were on the tray. There seemed to be wheat tea inside.

"Sorry for the wait."

The abbot said warmly, and placed the glass cup in front of Ryuuji and Mamiru.

Mamiru stretched his hand towards the cup first, but Ryuuji still had his arm crossed, and said to him,

"Mamiru, if you don't wish to die, then don't drink that thing."

Hearing that, the abbot's face froze. And Mamiru did not look that surprised, and only put the cup back on the table.

Ryuuji stared at the abbot's face and continued to speak,

"Stop with that boring act. Show your true form, youkai."

"Master Keikain..."

The abbot's round face showed a stiff smile. The sweat on his forehead gleamed in the light.

"I don't know what you're talking about...I am the abbot here..."

"Stop acting already. You disguised yourself as a human to ask for help from the Keikain family, and let these youkai kill the Onmyoji who came to help. If they fail, you poison them. I can see that you hate Onmyoji a lot."

The abbot shook his head as he lowered it. But when he lifted his head, there was a crack from his mouth to his eye.

"It can't be helped since I got found out."

"Just like I thought."

Ryuuji smiled broadly.

"It wouldn't be that painful if you just got poisoned, everything would have been okay as long as you drunk it obediently."

The youkai said as he turned back to his actual form. The abbot's body was ripped open and a creature with purple skin crawled out. Sharp ears and a torn mouth. His yellow eyes were very creepy.

"The disguise was really convincing. What about the abbot here? Did you kill him?"

"Hmph! He ran away a long time ago! But you would not be able to run away!"

The purple youkai stretched his arms towards Ryuuji. Ryuuji dodged the attack without any change in his expression, and got up quickly. Mamiru followed, standing up as well.

The two parties stared at each other across the table. The youkai talked, his voice full of hatred.

"They only sent the two of you here...I actually wanted to kill more Onmyoji."

"It's okay if you continue talking. You're going to get killed by these two people immediately anyway."

"Haha! Listen to your bullshit!"

The youkai laughed.

“Why do you think I took your cloaks? Now you don’t have your bamboo tubes or your talismans, let’s see what you can do!”

Ryuuji let out a “Hah”, and said with a smile,

“I’m sorry. I forgot one thing.”

“Ahh?”

“Youkai, I am a big liar. Therefore, I lied when I said that the bamboo tubes are all in my cloak. Actually---”

When he said that, Ryuuji reached behind him and took a bamboo tube out from his waist.

“I still have a bamboo tube here. Because I’m a coward.”

“Ah...”

The youkai’s eyes widened. Ryuuji uncapped the bamboo tube, and said,

“I apologise for being unable to serve you tea, so I’ll serve you this instead---“Garou”, devour him!”

After getting rid of the youkai disguised as the abbot and retrieving their coats, Ryuuji and Mamiru left the building.

When walking towards the gate, Mamiru asked a question.

“Ryuuji, when did you feel that the situation was strange?”

“Are you talking about the abbot? From the start, when he asked if other people were coming, I felt it was strange. Then when we were about to leave, he wanted us to stay and have some drinks, and that made me even more suspicious. Lastly he offered to take our cloaks, then I knew that he was definitely suspicious, like he really wanted to kill Onmyoji.”

“Then if you feel that it’s suspicious, why did you pass your cloak to him?”

“Hmph, that’s a good question.”

Ryuuji gave a small smile and he walked.

“Simple. If I refuse to hand over my cloak, the other party might sense that we are on our guard. If we do what he says, he will let his guard down, thinking that we did not suspect anything. Even though it would not make any difference if we raised our defences against small fry like that, but setting up a trap to cause the opponent to get careless will not hurt us at all.”

“Oh. I understand.”

Mamiru’s answer was as brief as before, making people wonder if he really understood. But everyone’s style of fighting is different. Setting up traps and keeping alert is Ryuuji’s strong point when fighting, and might not be that important to Mamiru, who emphasises on power.

“As for you, don’t go and take the cup just because there is tea to drink.”

Ryuuji’s voice became a little rough in tone, as he said this to Mamiru.

“Luckily I was there, or else you would have died once today...”

Once he said this, Ryuuji suddenly stopped talking. He had also stopped walking, staying where he was.

The two of them walked past the side of the main hall, and were on their way to the gate. The main hall after the cleansing bore evidence of the battle, and was especially quiet.

Ryuuji's line of sight was not directed towards the main hall, but on the gate.

"Mamiru, it seems like a large piece of garbage has not been cleared yet..."

Ryuuji said softly as he stared at the gate.

That ceramic gate had already turned into a youkai.

To describe it in one sentence, it was a large face. The tablet showing the name of the temple had two shining red eyes, and the gate which opened and closed was the mouth.

The gate had already separated from the mud wall, and was floating in the air. Which means, that large face was in the sky, waiting for the two of them to arrive. Obviously, this youkai is also a new species.

"A door can also become a youkai. Looks like these new species are of all types."

Ryuuji smiled forcefully. From this situation, it looks like they won't be able to leave if they didn't pass through this door.

"Mamiru."

Ryuuji called.

"The opponent is a big one, and could be quite difficult, but you are still going to go up against it. Think of it as a punishment for dying once today."

"Okay."

After the conversation ended, the two of them continued walking.

The gate floating in the sky, facing away from the black night. When they arrived underneath the gate, the youkai spoke. The gate opened to the side, and a voice which felt like it was pass through your chest was heard,

"Onmyoji, I count that you got lucky today. But tonight, forget about going home alive."

"Hmph, I never expect that besides the abbot, even the gate became a youkai."

"Being able to get rid of large amounts of youkai, and seeing through the abbot's identity, I can see that you have extraordinary skills. However, I am not so easy to deal with."

Upon closer examination, the scenery inside the door cannot be seen. The other side of the door was only a strange, flowing dark red mist.

"Onmyoji, you have passed through here alive once, now, I want you to go through these doors lying down!"

After saying this, the gates closed at the same time, and the entire gate fell straight down.

Ryuuji and Mamiru jumped back quickly. The huge gate fell on the position which the two of them were one second ago, producing a cloud of dust and a loud sound. Then it quickly floated up again, preparing the next attack.

Mamiru's speed was comparable as well. He faced the huge door in the air, and raised his talismans.

"Perish!"

Mamiru shouted, and released a lightning attack from his hands, hitting the door.

The door, having been hit by the lightning attack, stopped for a while, but that was all. The gate's body was huge, and seemed to be sturdy, so not much damage was done.

"It doesn't hurt at all!"

The door let out an angry yell, and fell straight down, aiming at Mamiru. Mamiru dodged quickly, releasing another lightning attack. But it was still unable to cause any fatal damage to the door.

The gate did not cease its attacks on Mamiru, floating up and falling down repeatedly. Mamiru kept running around like he was toying with the opponent, and did not forget to release his lightning attacks at the same time, but he still could not cause any significant damage, sometimes not hitting the huge door at all.

For Mamiru, this is a difficult battle. Even though he did not get hurt from the enemy's attacks, but the battle seemed to have reached a deadlock.

"Mamiru! Forget it! Leave the rest to me!"

Ryuuji shouted to stop him. But Mamiru only turned around and said,

"No."

Then, he returned to the battle. Ryuuji tsked.

"Mamiru! I'll give you a chance to attack later! Leave it to me for now!"

After rephrasing what he said, Mamiru finally listened to him obediently.

He ran towards Ryuuji. The huge door followed him.

Mamiru ran past Ryuuji, Ryuuji stepped forward towards the huge door, and pulled out "Gengen's" bamboo tube.

---The bigger the target is, the easier to hit. Konjosui Meteor!

The Konjosui bullets shot towards the huge door like a machine gun. But the bullets did not touch the huge door. The moment before the bullets hit the door, it opened its gates with force, and blew a strong gust of wind, scattering all the bullets.

"You won't hit me with water!"

A strong gust of wind blew as he shouted. This time, the wind was stronger than the one that blew away the bullets, and Ryuuji's body, like he was being toyed with, flew backwards.

---It looks like it would be difficult to attack him directly...

Ryuuji stood up, and shot the Konjosui Meteor once more. But in the end, it was blown away by the strong wind.

Dodging the door and fell downwards, firing the Konjosui Meteor immediately---Ryuuji kept repeating these actions. But he did not hit the huge door once.

"When I say it's no use, it's no use! It's too troublesome, I might as well get rid of all of you at once! "Oni gate cannon!"

The door started to open and close his gates repeatedly with force, shooting out air shots. Ryuuji and Mamiru changed their positions continuously, dodging the attacks. The air shots caused by the opening doors destroyed the stone steps, and made one huge hole after another in the mud wall. If they were hit directly, it would be fatal.

Ryuuji, who barely dodged the attack, sprained his ankle at that moment.

“Che!”

The huge door would definitely not pass on that chance. He aimed for Ryuuji, who had not stood up, and slammed downwards.

“Onmyoji, sink into the ground!”

The next second, a smile appeared on Ryuuji’s face.

Spraining his ankle and unable to stand up was all an act that Ryuuji produced. He quickly left his original position, and activated the switch---“Gengen’s” trap.

The door which attacked Ryuuji should have produced a loud sound as it hit the ground, but that was not the case.

Just as the huge door was about to hit the ground, its landing point *suddenly disappeared*.

To be more accurate, it didn’t disappear, but the ground melted, causing a deep bowl shaped hole.

As long as one thinks that a huge hole suddenly appeared in the ground, it will be easy to understand. The huge door fell into the hole just like that, and got stuck inside.

This is the trap Ryuuji set up. He repeatedly attacked with Konjosui, letting “Gengen” seep underground at the same time, preparing to melt the ground into a hole. After that was luring the door over, and hit the ‘switch’ as the door fell downwards. In the end, the result was very good. The huge door was stuck in the big hole, unable to move at all.

Ryuuji stood at the edge of the hole, and said as he gazed at the door,

“The one who sank is you, bastard.”

The huge door wriggled, and rubbing sounds were heard. It seemed like it was struggling very hard.

Ryuuji hmped, and waved his hand, splashing “Gengen” into the hole.

This time, there was no strong wind to block the attack. The huge door was splashed with the Konjosui that could melt everything, and let out a moan of terror. A curse was heard between the cries,

“On...Onmyoji! Even if you killed me, the result will be the same! As long as darkness exists, youkai like us will continue to appear, and would never disappear...!”

“So what? Even so, I will continue to exterminate you. Absolute evil like you cannot exist.”

Ryuuji said while glaring at the huge door.

---This is the destiny of the Keikain family.

He continued in his heart.

“Mamiru.”

Ryuuji called for Mamiru and pointed to the door with his chin.

“Even though it would continue melting if we left it alone, this smell is unbearable. Come lend a hand.”

Mamiru nodded, and scattered large amounts of talismans, like he wanted to seal up the hole. The talismans absorbed Mamiru’s spiritual power, and started to glow.

“Perish!”

Mamiru waved as arm as he yelled, the large amount of talismans releasing lightning, directed towards the practically melted door. After that was a series of lightning strikes.

After a while, the door finally stopped moaning.

Ryuuji spoke, asking Mamiru to stop the attack.

The huge door in the hole was burnt black, and did not breathe anymore. It looked just like a burnt house.

Chapter 8

On the way back from the temple, Ryuuji kept thinking about one thing.

Which would be the meaning of the curse said by the huge door as it was dying. The first time he heard it, nothing about it sounded strange.

Youkai cannot be eliminated completely, and will appear continuously. So everything that you Onmyoji do is a waste of effort---the Ryuuji at that time, got that feeling when he heard it.

But now that he thought carefully about it, there seemed to be something strange about it.

--- Even if you killed *me*, the result will be the same!

--- As long as darkness exists, *youkai like us will continue to appear!*

That youkai referred to himself as 'Ore', causing Ryuuji to get a strange feeling like he had a fish bone stuck in his throat.

The 'us' he was talking about, may not refer to all youkai in general, but to a specific type, like a sudden increase of new species in Kyoto's southern area. The more he thought about it, the more he felt that this might be the correct answer.

If that was really the case, new species of youkai will continue being produced, moving around this area once more. Even though they cleaned out a nest tonight, but a new nest may be built up one day. In that case, the Keikain family would have to take action to exterminate the youkai. It was no different from the whack-a-mole game.

The nest is just a container. If they could not figure out where the youkai inside came from, meaning finding the source of the new species of youkai, this incident would never be solved.

This incident is really troublesome this time. The reason why it's so hard to handle could be related to the weakening spiral seal.

Just then, someone shouted "Big Brother!"

As he was thinking while walking, his feet subconsciously chose the familiar path. Ryuuta and Yuri were at the usual place.

"Big brother, you pass by here often, are you very idle?"

Ryuuta said in a teasing manner. Yuri also laughed lightly next to her older brother.

"We're not idle at all. We've been working the whole time, and only finished it now."

"Work? Till the middle of the night?"

"That's right, just like your father."

Once Ryuuji said that, he suddenly recalled what he wanted to ask before.

“Oh right, which company is your father at? Unable to come home even though it’s this late, isn’t he doing overtime too often?”

“Overtime?”

Ryuuta tilted his head first, then he said,

“That’s not it, my father doesn’t work in a company.”

“Huh? Doesn’t work in a company?”

“Yeah, he works alone in the room.”

“By himself?”

Ryuuji asked in return. This time Yuri spoke,

“Yeah, daddy works as an illustrator.”

After saying that, Yuri took out a sketchbook. Which is the sketchbook that often kept the siblings company. Originally, they thought it was a book which they could draw in to pass the time, but it wasn’t like that, their father is an illustration artist.

Ryuuji took the sketchbook and opened it, and sucked in his breath as he saw the first picture.

---This is...

The drawing inside is a youkai. Purple skin, sharp ears, torn mouth and yellow eyes. It was exactly the same as the youkai who disguised as the abbot and tried to poison Ryuuji and Mamiru.

The other pages contained a creature that looked like a crab. That appearance looked like it came out from the same mould as the disgusting youkai which they exterminated in the park a few days ago.

Ryuuji turned around and gave a look to Mamiru. Mamiru also glanced at the book for a while. Then he met Ryuuji’s eyes and nodded.

“The same.”

Mamiru only said these two words.

Ryuuji continued flipping, and found the Tomoe Oni. Three youkai, with their appearance being three horns and three teeth, and holding short spears. The youkai’s name was in the corner, together with a basic description---

“Tomoe Oni.”

(The three attack as a group, the fourth ones hides in the dark and does sneak attacks.)

It was written inside. Completely overlapping with the four youkai that night.

The door youkai which they defeated while they were leaving, was also in that sketchbook.

“Youkai wind gate.”

(Repeated opening its doors to shoot out air cannon attacks. Usually disguised as temple gates.)

Seeing this much, there was no need to suspect anymore. The youkai in the sketchbook were the new species which Ryuuji and Mamiru had fought and defeated. About the others who were killed in a short time, the small fry which

they had no impression of, even though they had no way to investigate, they should be contained somewhere in the sketchbook.

All the consistencies pointed to one answer---these illustrated youkai were given a solid vessel, appearing in the “outside world”. Besides that, there are no other possibilities.

At that moment, Ryuuji remembered the story of the “Spirit drawing”. An artist had drawn a woman on a screen. Some years later, the woman walked out of the screen and appeared in front of humans. As the artist’s will was contained inside, giving life to the subject in the picture, the woman in the screen was able to walk out from the picture.

Remembering this, the conversation he had with Akifusa in the day surfaced in his mind---

Akifusa said, a spirit sword containing a strong will would possess a lot of power. The situation now probably followed the same principle. The creator’s will was contained in the illustration and the youkai in the picture solidified, walking on the streets of Kyoto, and settling in the temple.

The nest, is just a “container”. Ryuuji felt this was the case again. These youkai were ‘given’ a container through the works of an illustration artist.

---I never expected that the answer will be in this sort of place.

Ryuuji stared at the drawings with a stern look on his face. Then---

“It’s amazing right?”

Ryuuta said happily.

“...Ohh, that’s right, it’s amazing. So your father actually draws these sorts of pictures.”

“Yeah, my father is supposed to design the enemy characters in a game. It’s cool right?”

“And the pictures in books as well.”

Yuri said as well. She should be referring to the insert pictures in novels.

Suddenly, Ryuuji realized something.

The father of these two siblings, should be in the house drawing illustrations. Which means, he is currently continuously sending new species of youkai into this world.

Currently he needed to meet their father quickly. But before that, he needed to confirm some things.

“Young ones, why doesn’t your father work at home? If he is able to draw at home, then you wouldn’t have to wait for him outside every night, right?”

Ryuuji asked. The two siblings looked at each other in response, and then Ryuuta said with a lonely expression on his face,

“Dad said that he gets distracted if we’re around, so he rented an apartment outside to work.”

“So that’s why.”

“Before that, he had always worked at home. But one month ago, dad became more and more bad tempered, then he went outside to work. It’s been like this recently, he would just space out when he returns home from work, ignoring us...”

Ryuuta continued to say. With regards to the changes in Ryuuta's father, even though he wanted to know more details, he needs to take action first.

"Ryuuta, Yuri."

Ryuuji crouched down in front of the siblings such that he was on eye level with them.

"I'm sorry, but can you take us to where your father works? Big brother wishes to speak with your father."

"Go to where dad works?"

"Yeah."

"But..."

Ryuuta lowered his head.

"I don't really want to bring you there..."

"Why?"

"Because..." Ryuuta paused for a while, and then spoke with a heavy voice,

"Before Yuri and I went there in secret, wanting to surprise our father. As a result, dad was so angry, and said he was still working and we aren't allowed to go in whenever we want..."

"Dad was so scary at the time. His face was like a monster..."

Yuri seemed to remember the situation at that time, and fear showed on her face.

The siblings obviously did not want to bring Ryuuji and Mamiru to find their father. But Ryuuji would not give up because of that. Hearing this only strengthened Ryuuji's resolve to see their father.

"Ryuuta, Yuri, how about this? You just have to bring me to the place where your father works. After that we will greet your father on our own, and of course, we won't say that you showed us the way here, is that okay?"

"What do you want to say to dad?"

Ryuuta's voice was filled with unease. Like he felt that he was helping someone do bad things by doing so.

"Nothing much."

Ryuuji said.

"I just want to ask how he is able to draw so well, and if there are any trade secrets to it."

Chapter 9

The apartment where they met the siblings was only one kilometer away from the place where their father works.

Even for children, it would only take a few minutes of walking to reach the place.

It's a block of one room apartments. Ryuuta said, his father is on the fourth floor.

Luckily, this place did not have automatic level security.

Ryuuji stood in front of the apartment's elevator, and instructed the siblings.

"We're going to find your father now. Both of you stay here obediently, we'll be back very soon, don't run off with strange adults."

"Okay."

"I understand."

The siblings replied one after another. Ryuuji placed his hand on Ryuuta's head, and said,

"Before big brother comes back, you have to protect your younger sister, understand?"

"I understand."

The short haired young boy nodded with conviction.

Ryuuji also responded with a nod, then he looked towards Mamiru. The look in his eyes conveyed the start of the operation.

The two of them took the elevator to the fourth floor. According to room number which the siblings told them, it should be the farthest room in the corridor.

The door of the apartment was made of metal, and it felt like one of the older designs.

Ryuuji pressed the doorbell. No one answered the door after a while, so he could only press it once more.

A faint sound was heard on the other side of the door. From the looks of it, someone had looked through the peephole to see what was going on outside.

The other party may pretend that no one was at home. Faced with this situation, they could only press the doorbell continuously. If the door was not opened after that, they could only break down the door and force their way in.

Just as Ryuuji was thinking about these things, the metal door produced a shifting sound, it was opened.

Even though the door was open, but it showed opened a gap the length of the door chain.

"What is it?"

A man's raspy voice was heard on the other side of the door.

Ryuuji peered at the person inside from the gap in the doorway. Seeing this appearance, Ryuuji was too shocked to say anything. The man had messy hair, sunken cheeks, with eye bags under his eyes, just like a living ghost. But his eyes were full of life, it was a very strange feeling.

Was it this face? Ryuuji thought. He remembered Yuri said it before, a face just like a monster.

Just then, a strong smell wafted out from inside the house. This was not youki and felt more like fumes. Even though it couldn't be seen with the naked eye, but if it was described by colour, it would be black. The accumulated will was fermenting, turning into black gas and filling up the whole room.

"If it's nothing, I'm going to close the door."

The man replied coldly, and he was going to close the door.

"Wait a moment."

Ryuuji used his geta to fill in the gap, stopping him from closing the door.

"Mamiru."

Having only said this, Mamiru had immediately sensed what Ryuuji's instructions were. He grabbed the edge of the door and forced it open. The door chain broke and flew away and the man, grabbing on the doorknob, was pulled forward.

Ryuuji dodged the man who had fallen on the porch, and entered the room on his own.

The room at the end of the short corridor was current oozing out a dense, pungent fume.

Ryuuji entered the room with his wooden geta still on. Inside was a western style room about 4 tsubo in size. (4 tsubo is about the size of 8 tatami mats.) A table was placed in the corner in the corner of the room, with an open sketchbook placed on it. It was currently emitting dense black gas.

There was an unfinished picture of a strange creature in the sketchbook. It didn't look like an ordinary youkai, and looked more like a western beast. It has a muscular human like body, with three dragon heads. Even though it had not been coloured, but the lines were detailed and lifelike, like it *could start moving any moment*.

Flipping to the next page, the gas emitted started to increase in density. This page has already been coloured and is a finished piece. So the amount of spirit contained inside was stronger than the previous one. This time, it is a rotting zombie holding an axe.

Mamiru entered the room some time later, standing next to Ryuuji. At that moment, the zombie like creature's eyes lit up, giving off a red glow.

---This guy *is about to climb out...!*

"Mamiru!" Ryuuji shouted. "Perish!" Mamiru's voice sounded at the exact same time.

Mamiru threw the talismans towards the zombie drawing. Lightning flashed in all directions in that instant, and the illustration of the zombie turned into ashes, even the sketchbook was burnt black.

"Ah..."

The man's voice was heard at that time.

He rushed towards the desk, and turned around, grabbing Ryuuji's collar.

"Look what you guys did! Do you know how much effort and passion I put into these?!"

The man was frothing at the mouth, his face full of rage. However, Ryuuji only replied calmly,

"Mister, it's really fine if it's just passion. But what you have put into this are just black negative thoughts. And it's an abnormal amount as well."

Saying this, Ryuuji poured "Gengen" on the metal shelf in the corner of the room. That shelf also contained a few sketchbooks that emitted black smoke. The sketchbooks started to melt once they made contact with "Gengen", and disappeared without a trace.

"Ahh! What are you doing!"

The man gave a pained shout, rushing towards the shelf. But his "creations" are no longer there.

"You two..."

The man who turned around had a hideous face, and did not look like a human at all. His face had puffed up due to anger, and he was drooling from the corners of his mouth. His eyes were unfocused.

“You actually did such an unsalvageable thing! What you destroyed are the works of a genius! I’m a genius! A genius artist! I am the definition of a genius! But why doesn’t anyone recognize my talent!”

The man, who was shouting angrily, had already been corrupted by the darkness in his heart.

It looks like this man is an illustrator who had a streak of poor luck. The man wanted to be recognized more than anyone, but it didn’t happen, and he was anxious and frustrated. He possessed a large amount of talent yet did not get the feedback and rewards he deserves. His inflated ego and reality clashed many times, but he still craved for recognition, and the result was the production of the ill will. This will transferred into the pictures from his pen, and the youkai gained life because of that, running out of the book...

Judging from this, it was a very dangerous thing for Ryuuta and Yuri to be holding that sketchbook. Luckily all the youkai in that book had already left, so the two of them were safe now. But if the book was given to the siblings as the youkai were about to leave, Ryuuji might have found their young corpses in front of the apartment instead.

In short, he couldn’t leave the man in front of him alone. He couldn’t be allowed to produce more youkai, allowing them to run rampant in Kyoto.

“Mamiru, you can do *the final touches*. Chase away the ‘black’ inside him and get rid of it.”

“Okay.”

Mamiru answered, and pulled out his talismans immediately.

Hearing the conversation between the two Onmyoji, the illustrator---or the entity inside him, to be exact, seemed to sense what was going to happen next.

“Wa...wait a moment! Stop!”

“How can we stop. Mister...it might hurt a bit, please bear with it. Mamiru, go.”

Receiving Ryuuji’s order, Mamiru threw the talismans towards the man immediately.

The man, who was shocked, went into a seizure. He let out a scream that would let anyone want to cover his ears. After a while, the seizures stopped.

The man fell to the ground, still.

“You didn’t kill him, did you?”

Ryuuji asked.

“No, just the *inside*.”

Mamiru answered.

It looked like everything went smoothly. After a while, the fallen man opened his eyes, letting out a small moan.

Even though he looked exhausted, his expression was calmer than before. He sat up and saw two men in black cloaks standing there, which shocked him.

Ryuuji quickly lifted a finger to his lips, telling the man to keep quiet.

“We are Onmyoji. We heard from your son and daughter that you have been acting weirdly lately, so we came here to heal you.”

Ryuuji looked straight into the eyes of the other party and said this slowly.

However, Ryuuji did not explain everything that had happened. If the man knew that all the youkai he drew had gained solid bodies and occupied a whole temple, it might give him a bigger blow such that he might not be able to recover from it.

Because he overworked himself, he became very quiet at home, saddening his children---Ryuuji's explanation ended there, mentioning nothing else about the rest.

"...It was like that. Recently at work, my jobs were either cancelled or rejected, causing me to become very anxious. In order not to affect my family with my feelings, I rented an apartment outside to work, but the situation did not improve at all..."

The man said weakly.

"But thanks to the treatment from both of you, I feel more relaxed now."

"I think so too. *The thing in your body* has been chased away, so you should feel more relaxed."

"Thank you very much. I won't force myself like that ever again, and I will try to take a more relaxed approach towards work."

Just as the man nodded happily, Ryuuta's voice was heard suddenly as he called for his father, the siblings ran into the apartment.

As Ryuuji and the man were talking, Mamiru took the chance to go downstairs and brought them up.

"Dad, we came again, you won't get angry?"

Seeing his father hugging him and his sister tightly, Ryuuta asked in surprise.

"Why would I get angry? Ryuuta, Yuri, daddy is very sorry. Because I was so tired from work, I have neglected the both of you..."

The father sounded like he was holding back tears. Then, Yuri asked suddenly,

"Dad, what did you say to the big brother who sells Gofuku?"

"The big brother who sells Gofuku?"

The father's eyes widened as he asked Ryuuji.

The liar's expression did not change at all, and continued the act he was good at,

"Oh, it was nothing. Because your father can draw very well, so I wanted him to draw some designs for the new clothes, that's all."

"Isn't that right, mister?" he added. Causing other people to become his accomplice was an easy and regular thing for a natural liar like him.

Chapter 10

After leaving the apartment, Ryuuji felt a sudden wave of exhaustion.

Today---or tonight, to be more accurate, was a busy period. They had probably broken a new record for the number of youkai they had slain today.

Ryuuji and Mamiru bid farewell to the siblings, still under the cover of Gofuku merchants.

"We will go to Nishi to visit big brother."

Ryuuta said.

“Even if you came, you might not find us. We tend to go out a lot for work.”

Ryuuji avoided a direct answer. The children who had cried when they first met had slowly developed a liking for Ryuuji without him realizing it.

The father accompanied them to the door, and even offered to give them a gift as thanks while they were leaving, Ryuuji had rejected the proposal.

“Please get along well from now on, goodbye.”

After saying that, Ryuuji closed the door.

The sound of wooden geta and long boots echoed through the residential area.

Ryuuji raised his head towards the sky as he walked towards the place where he could flag down a taxi. The night sky was dark, with no stars in sight. Ryuuji sighed and this was accidentally heard by Mamiru.

“Ryuuji, you’re tired.”

Ryuuji tsked, and said,

“We worked for a long time today, of course it’s tiring, you’re also...wrong, you probably don’t feel tired at all.”

“I’m not tired, I can still exterminate youkai.”

“Really? Your stamina is really good, how enviable. As long as you’re here, the Keikain family will have a bright future.”

Ryuuji said in a joking tone, and gave a mocking smile.

Talking about the future of the Keikain family, Ryuuji suddenly thought of Yura.

The schools should be on their summer break at this time. Yura, who had not contacted the main house in a long time, probably would not return at this time. In her heart, she probably decided that she would not return home unless she grew stronger.

---Forget it, she can do what she wants.

Ryuuji thought. If she came back, he would definitely test her as an older brother, just to see how strong she had become...

If she was as weak as before, how should he punish her? Throw her into the compost pile just like before. The more he thought about it, the more amusing he found it.

“Ryuuji, you laughed.”

“Yeah, I thought of something really funny.”

Ryuuji said. He didn’t know if Mamiru still remembered this, but Ryuuji decided to keep it to himself and not speak of it.

Two days later, Ryuuji and Mamiru set off to Ukiyoe.

The seventh and eighth seal in the spiral seal have been destroyed, and the Keikain family had to choose two new guardians quickly.

The Head of the family, Hidemoto, decided to take in Mamiru as one of the members of the main family, and become an acting guardian, and the other guardian would temporarily be Yura.

“Ryuuji, Mamiru, go to Ukiyoe quickly and bring Yura back.”

Hidemoto gave the order in the hall where the elders of the main and branch families gathered. Hearing this, Ryuuji said as he clicked his tongue,

“...The two of us again? Seriously, how troublesome.”

Keikain Ryuuji is a liar through and through.

~Fin~